

秋月アスカ

イラスト 白崎小夜

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LIGHT BEYOND

— Michi Hate No Mukou No Hikari —

- VOLUME 4 -

The Spun Tale of a Miracle

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Chapter One

“The Lord, Vida, is together with us at all times.”

The priest’s low voice resounded through the worship hall.

Asyut, with his eyes slightly lowered, focused his ears on the recitation of the scripture. They were already words of prayer that he had memorized word for word without errors, but right now to Asyut they only resounded exceedingly empty. Asyut just kept silent and hung his head, not moving like a stone statue.

“Let us pray.”

The priest’s words paused and the place was enveloped in a serene air. The sunlight that came in from the large windows covered Asyut’s closed eyes. It was a painful silence. Eventually, when he opened his eyes, the large altar decorated with elaborate craftsmanship leapt into his vision. Asyut looked up at it, unaffected by its overwhelming appearance.

Next to him, there is no form of the girl who had always accompanied him in this ceremony during the past year.

He was still not accustomed to kneeling in front of the altar all alone like this.

Asyut glanced at the spot beside him, only moving his eyes. The chair, which had lost its owner, appeared somewhat lonely. No, perhaps the one who was lonely was he himself–.

The Ceremony of Worship soon ended. Asyut stepped back to the side of the altar and sighed without notice. Nearly fifty of the country’s statesmen, who had been offering similar prayers, behind him began to leave the building in their own direction. As Asyut watched their backs, he idly wondered how long this ceremony could continue.

Among the people who were standing up from their seats at their own pace, there was one person who didn’t move and continued to offer prayers in his seat. The elderly man garbed in priest robes and with hair that was streaked gray was one of the high priests, Roblin. Even he, who normally frightened his surroundings with his spread

out aura of intimidation, was merely a devout follower when he kneeled in front of God to pray. At last, seeing the moment he raised his head, Asyut walked up to him from the side of the altar.

“Father Roblin.”

He called out in a quiet voice. There was already the usual deep wrinkles carved into Roblin’s brows when the man looked at him.

“Lord Asyut, I see. It is impolite to call out to someone in a place of prayer.”

It was a voice that did not hide his displeasure. However, Asyut did not waver.

“If it isn’t in such a place, it doesn’t seem like I can obtain an opportunity to speak with you... Especially recently.”

“Hmph, I do not believe there is a need in and of itself to speak with me.”

Roblin said that over his shoulder and stood up.

“Then I will conclude this matter shortly.”

Asyut stood in Roblin’s way to block his path of retreat.

“–I would like to inquire as to how long you intend to continue this.”

“I do not understand what you are talking about.”

“Of course I am talking about Lady Celiastina. You and your men have taken her away to the Priest Tower and several weeks have already passed. On that note, even the king has not been permitted to meet her and I do not think those are sane instructions.”

“That is not what I do not understand. I am saying the question “how long” itself is meaningless. I believe it was told to you as well, that originally Lady Celiastina is a lady who should have been together with us. Welcoming her into the Priest Tower presently is how things ought to have been.”

“If you stepped through legitimate arrangements then that may be the case. However, right now the things you and your men have done are clearly wrong. It could even be called an abduction and confinement.”

“Watch your tongue, boy.”

Roblin scolded him in a noticeably low voice.

“We cannot allow the king to use the Lady Saint as he pleases any more than this. We are of the position where we must protect Lady Celiastina. No matter what shape that may take.”

“You men? When you’ve left her completely alone until now.”

“The same can be said of you.”

Asyut’s brows furrowed at the words that were returned lightning-quick.

“I regret my own powerlessness. To have the country be churned up by the imposter saint, so great is my mistake that I cannot even face the king. But if these events were devised by the king then I absolutely cannot forgive the king.”

Roblin glared at Asyut with eyes that seemed to burn. His tightly clenched fists trembled faintly.

“Those speculations should not be voiced aloud.”

Asyut chided him in a quiet tone.

Apparently, Roblin seemed to think that the events related to Celiastina in this past year were all traps devised by the king.

Hiding as an imposter, a “saint-like” “saint” would be shown in front of everyone. Finally, after seeing the entire royal palace open their hearts to the imposter saint, the truth would be revealed. That the girl was not real, and that the real one was “that”. The unchanged cruel and merciless saint-. Now then, can the people judge which one of them was truly suited as the saint? Is it the Holy Mark on the neck that is important? Or...

In fact, about this matter, the royal palace was secretly swallowed by a whirlpool of confusion.

From the day it was known throughout the castle that in this past year the saint shown in front of everyone was a fake and that the real Saint Celiastina was taken away by

the priests to the Priest Tower, the discord between the king's faction and the priest faction only deepened more and more. There was the king's faction which wanted to prune the influence of the priests, and the priest faction which strongly opposed that. There were no signs of compromising between either of them.

To begin with, King Ronbarno had been aiming to weaken the priest faction and laid the foundations for a long, long time. Even leaving the selfish and brutally acting Saint Celiastina unregulated was nothing other than him thinking to expose in broad daylight the dangers of the being called a "saint" and, in addition, "religion" itself having authority and power. It is not a person chosen by God, but a person chosen by the people, who should be suited to standing at the head of people– he wanted to make this known to everyone.

It must have been good fortune to the king for a single girl to suddenly appear there in the royal palace with an appearance similar to Celiastina with no difference. The king certainly used her. Roblin was surely the type that was stubborn about his suspicions.

However, with Roblin, he was not going to simply stay silent and let the king go. Even now, he understood clearly the fact that everything was already going according to the king's will. And it is on keeping this in mind that he took a reckless action to confine Celiastina in the tower. He was waiting for the time. For the moment he could grab the tail of the king's "conspiracy"–.

But.

(There is almost no time left.)

The time allowed to the priests was this moment only when the king was showing an attitude of tolerance. The king could start to do something at any time. If he decided to completely discard the priests then he would not hesitate to even lead the soldiers to invade the Priest Tower, said to be consecrated ground.

"Father Roblin, I ask you to please reconsider this. At this rate, even if Lady Celiastina is confined, the issues will not be resolved."

"I do not think that. If the king prepared an imposter saint then this is an enormous issue that will shake the country. It is absurd to let out Lady Celiastina from the tower without pursuing that."

“Such thoughts are nothing more than your own, are they not. Where is your evidence?”

“There is none yet. That is precisely why we must move towards elucidating the truth.”

Roblin continued speaking with a strong tone.

“Who exactly was the imposter saint? And, in this past year, who was hiding the real Lady Celiastina? We, who are the children of God, have a duty to reveal everything to God. If we place a lid on the truth now, are you saying it is fine to have a similar thing repeated again in the near future?”

“.....”

“Even if that were the case, the king has hid that daughter somewhere. No, perhaps she has already been dealt with now that she served her purpose. In any case, we must know everything.”

Asyut kept silent again.

He had no objection to Roblin’s words. However, there was a large misunderstanding. The one matter of the imposter saint was not an event arranged by King Ronbarno. He only used it well.

Even the king could not grasp her whereabouts.

Nobody– knew where that girl had gone.

The girl called Yuna disappeared unexpectedly from the royal palace.

If her words when she had left were everything, then Yuna no longer existed in this world. She was an illusionary girl who had already died one year ago. No matter how much Roblin yelled and shouted, she would never appear again.

But, maybe...

If he could find hope in the words Celiastina said right before she was taken away to the tower, then...

–I wish to go and save that girl.

“In any case, for the situation to change the imposter saint must be found.”

Asyut, who had been immersed in his own thoughts unawares, raised his lowered gaze at Roblin’s utterance.

“If your side shows an effort to do that then we will respond with discussions on the treatment of Lady Celiastina.”

“.....”

Asyut knew well that this condition was basically meaningless. The reason why was because the king had no interest at all in responding to Roblin’s dealings. It was convenient for him to have the imposter saint remain gone like this. Even now the king, while publically conducting a search for the imposter saint who suddenly disappeared, continued to give non-committal responses to the surrounding voices of doubt. If the priest faction began pursuing the matter related to the imposter saint in earnest, the king only needed to crush them without question. From the start, there was no chess piece in Roblin’s hands.

But.

(Not everything should go according to how the king wishes.)

Asyut stared firmly at Roblin.

Even if the king was to try and discard Yuna, Asyut himself would not give up.

He couldn’t lost sight of the faint light he saw in his despair.

Find Yuna who had disappeared.

“–I understand.”

Asyut responded in an unwavering voice.

“I will certainly reveal the truth clearly to you.”

That resolution had already been made from the instant he lost her in front of the asiatic jasmine.

†

“Yo, how was it. No progress?”

Siegcrest was waiting to the side of the exit after Asyut left the worship hall. He straightened his back from leaning it against the white wall, wearing his squad's uniform as messily as usual, and pestered Asyut with that question.

“I saw that old man Roblin come out of here just now. He had that same crabby look you happen to have right now.”

“Don't joke.”

“How do I put it, the other side's not gonna back out either, huh. From their standpoint of getting all worked up and dragging Celiastina to the Priest Tower, simply releasing her would be like giving in to the king. Once it's like this, it's rare they'll concede to surrendering.”

Bothersome old men, Siegcrest muttered in disgust as he started to walk.

“I wonder what's gonna happen in the end. Is the person under house arrest at the tower right now really not the Celiastina we know? In the first place, if that's the case, where did the person herself go?”

Those words from Siegcrest could be said to speak for the feelings of the entire royal palace right now. From the uprising of the anti-saint faction, everything passed by in a rush, and now everything was vague.

“I really don't get anything. What's the lie, and what's the truth.”

“...If.”

Asyut murmured this in a small lost voice that surprised even himself.

“If the Lady Celiastina in the tower right now isn’t the one we know, what would you do?”

“Hah? What do you mean what would I do?”

“I’m wondering if you would still want to hurry and release the unknown Lady Celiastina.”

Siegcrest, who stopped and turned back, looked at Asyut with an expression that seemed somewhat displeased.

“Of course. If a young girl is trapped in a tower against her will, then it’s normal for me to think about wanting to release her. It doesn’t matter if they’re someone I know or a stranger.”

“So you say, but there’s no way you don’t know what kind of person the original Lady Celiastina was.”

“Look, what exactly are you wanting to say.”

Siegcrest asked back without trying to conceal his annoyance.

“Aren’t you afraid for that Lady Celiastina to be released?”

“Hey now, nothing can be done about that even if you worry until you’re exhausted.”

Siegcrest stated that easily in a way that was completely like him.

“In the first place, I only know about Celiastina the Saint through rumors. There are things I haven’t thought about since it hasn’t come close to me, unlike you and the others. But I’m confident you all bear that in mind. Next time, if Celiastina were to try and repeat the same things, everyone will stop her. They’ll stop her with all they have. Maybe we couldn’t do that before, but we’ll be able to do it next time.”

As he said this Siegcrest poked Asyut’s shoulder.

“Before, you were made to bear something super heavy. But you can relax this time. Everyone’s already realized what a true saint should be like. Celia taught us that, right? That’s why everyone won’t make that mistake anymore.”

It'll be okay, Siecrest repeated.

"...Is that how it is. No, that might be how it is."

Yuna disappearing and Celiastina returning didn't mean that everything would go back to how it was originally. Asyut thought that he was saved by Siecrest's words.

"Anyway, nothing's gonna get settled like this right now. And, either way, we can't leave Celiastina to be confined in the Priest Tower her whole life. We gotta meet with the priests somewhere and get Celiastina out."

Siecrest shrugged his shoulders as they started to walk down the long corridor again.

"The quickest way to compromise would be to capture all the released anti-saint faction people again and execute them."

"That's impossible."

Asyut denied that in a flash.

By this time, the members of the anti-saint faction who had revolted were all liberated already by the pardon of the king. Originally, they should have been sentenced to death on the crime of opposing the king and saint. Naturally, even in the royal palace the liberation of anti-saint faction members was divided into people for and against it. The priests, above all, strongly objected to it. To point a blade at the saint was the same as harming God. The priests insisted strongly that the anti-saint faction must compensate for their crimes with capital punishment.

However, in reality, that these events were made out to be a "moving tale" in and of itself was certainly the most frightening thing of all to them. It was extremely inconvenient for the priests to have the saint's tyranny up to now exposed to the public and to approve the anti-saint faction fighting against that at long last.

And their concerns were also very reasonable.

However, it would not be an exaggeration to say that this was precisely why the king decided to pardon the anti-saint faction.

Asyut, who had served by the side of the king for a long time, felt like he could pick up and understand the king's expectations.

"The king shouldn't be holding the option of capturing the anti-saint faction again. The inspection body for the priests is planned to be established soon and, from the outset, it was arranged for several main members of the anti-saint faction to be incorporated. The priest faction know that it is too late to stop it now."

More to say, Roblin and others like him had already given up on this matter as hopeless and were trying to grasp onto a more effective "trump card".

"Did your sister also join the inspection body?"

"No. Milifaire is working at an institution for nurses under the supervision of the country. It's likely she'll continue with that in the future too."

"I see..."

Siegcrest nodded placidly.

"Well, what with it being a settled talk it'd feel bad to bring it up again when they weren't punished, so I guess that's fine. There's no way but to win over the priests from another side."

"Regarding that, a direction has been solidifying."

Siegcrest blinked his eyes at the words Asyut released without delay.

"Huh, what'd you say?"

"I spoke about it with Father Roblin in the conversation we just had back there. He wants the girl, who has been serving as the saint this past year, to be found and brought to the royal palace."

"You mean, the Celiastina we know."

"Yes. And he wants everything to be revealed. What exactly happened in this royal palace during that year."

"So, the girl in the tower really is a different person then."

Siegcrest shrugged his shoulders in a large motion.

“Then, if you bring Celia to the royal palace, they’ll be okay with releasing Celiastina from the tower? And he accepted those conditions, that old man Roblin? There’s no benefits for the priest faction with that.”

“That’s not true. Father Roblin thinks that, by publicizing that girl’s existence, he might be able to throw out facts that the king does not want exposed. For example, if the substitution of the saint and the uprising of the anti-saint faction were all events devised by the king, then that would be an enormous issue with regard to the country. There are many who would not forgive even the king for treating the saint, a holy existence, as he pleased.”

“And what is it actually.”

“...I don’t know.”

Siegcrest didn’t press deeply when Asyut prevaricated his words.

“But, you know, even if they rouse up a lot of animosity, isn’t that just all there is? I can’t think of it being a trump card that’ll overturn the disadvantage of the priest faction.”

“Perhaps, but it is better than doing nothing at all, no doubt. Either way, it is almost certain that the priest faction will be consumed by the king. For them, they are already wagering on their lives being cast away and thinking it would be fine if they could drag the king down along with them.”

An unproductive battle. Unable to hide his displeasure at last, Siegcrest glared at the sky with half-closed eyes.

“In the end the saint is just a tool for the king’s faction and the priest faction, huh.”

“.....”

“Are you going to get on that too? Are you okay with pulling Celia out of wherever she might be living peacefully right into the middle of this conflict and exposing her to danger?”

“That’s not–“

“–what you’re doing, except you can’t say that. Because that is what you’re doing. Look, even I’m curious about where Celia is right now and what she’s doing and, if I could, I’d like to see her. But if it means throwing her out like a sacrificial lamb in front of the king and Roblin then, even if we don’t meet ever again, I’ll secretly leave her alone.”

He understood well what Siecrest was saying. It was a sound argument, painfully so.

Everyone was trying to use that girl– Yuna, for their own selfish convenience and wanting to take her out to the center stage again. It was the same with Asyut. Because he wanted to see her, he didn’t want the days she spent here to become an illusion, and that selfish desire was even now about to make him move.

“I know you want to see Celia more than anyone else. But, if you’re gonna get on board with this stuff, you better have an appropriate resolution.”

Resolution.

Siecrest’s words echoed strongly in his mind.

“You’re not gonna go find Celia, bring her back, be like “I’m so happy to see you again”, then say okay bye, right? Then what are you gonna do after that. Have you prepared yourself for everything that’ll happen?”

“–That’s.”

“You’re the First Holy Knight. Even right now in this moment, that hasn’t changed.”

“.....”

“Vice-captain, so here’s where you’ve been!”

At that moment, the voice of a young man broke in between the two of them. Siecrest, who looked like he was going to encroach even more on Asyut, turned around and looked as if he were given the dodge. The owner of the voice was a member of the Order of Knights. He looked to be flustered as he ran over to them.

“What’s up.”

“I apologize for my interruption. A small problem has occurred and I would like to request your presence urgently.”

“Problem?”

“That is, in the vicinity of the Priest Tower, the vice-captain of our unit is arguing with a certain priest. As subordinates we cannot stop him...”

“Which unit?”

“The fourth unit, ser.”

“Got it, I’ll go right now.”

Siegcrest, who switched his frame of mind instantly, went to leave but also threw his gaze at Asyut who stood still on the spot.

“I snapped at you about a lot of things but I’m your friend, Asyut. If you’re going to go on the path you choose, then I’ll support you with everything I have no matter what path it is. But before you start running, you should think things over carefully again.”

Siegcrest hit Asyut on the arm lightly and then rushed down the corridor behind his subordinate. It was only after he saw that back become small that Asyut left that spot.

(“You are the First Holy Knight”, huh.)

Asyut bit his lip strongly.

He knew that. But he couldn’t deny that he tried not to think about that. Even if he was able to get back Yuna, what did he want to do after that? There was the him who was the First Holy Knight, and then the him who was nobody. Whenever he tried to think on it, his thoughts would always come to stop.

(But... right now, I just want to see her.)

Asyut stopped moving again and looked out the window from the corridor. What he saw was the brown wall of the building beside him and the tall trees that dotted the garden. It was a landscape that was none the better for the change. However, in Asyut’s mind, the back of a girl standing there in a flower field of full blooms appeared.

The season when the torch bugs would emit their beautiful lights was arriving soon.

Chapter Two

Looking up at the evening sky, dyed red, Yodel's eyes squinted gently in contentment.

The only sounds that reached her ears were the rhythmic hoofbeats of the horse traversing the hill and the wind brushing against clothes. Neither of the two priests, who shared this long journey together with her, opened their mouths as they followed after Yodel.

In the far distance, under the sky, spread the nostalgic sight of the royal capital.

(I've returned.)

Yodel told herself in her mind.

It was over half a year ago that she, who had rarely left the royal palace since she was born, rushed out of the royal capital on a journey she called a pilgrimage. When she looked back at the impetus for leaving on a journey, her heart felt painful even now.

She was a high ranking priestess, expected to be a mediator between the government officials and the priests. Yodel, who had been in the center of the country since from a young age, had believed from the depths of her heart that she would be the one to make this country more wonderful. In the midst of this, she met Saint Celiastina who was summoned to the royal palace, and the days where hatred was worsened at the saint's inhuman actions began. Even though everyone around Yodel should have had the same feelings, she was disappointed at the reality where not one person remonstrated the saint. And then, Yodel came to a decision. That she would draw out the voices of anger towards the saint from the country's people. The method Yodel chose for that was to incite one unfortunate young man and act out a "tragedy" where he would be executed gruesomely by the saint.

At the time, she thought it was a necessary evil. She thought that if everyone said they did not want to become covered in mud, then she only had to be covered in it. In order to move the country, some sacrifices were unavoidable. Yodel tried to convince herself that she did not notice her heart being horribly grinded.

It was Celiastina herself who pointed that out in a desperate voice. She confronted

Yodel directly and delivered Yodel from the darkness. Be that as it may, it wasn't that Yodel recognized and approved her from that one matter alone. However, at the same time, she could only admit that her own deeds were a mistake.

On this occasion, she had lost sight of who she should be and wanted to be. Yodel inconspicuously rushed out of the castle in order to reconsider the future that was her goal.

(In truth, I wanted to continue this journey for a while longer though.)

Yodel closed her eyes for a brief period as her body swayed on top of the horse.

The world was large. There were mountains of things one should see, hear, and feel. The many happenings that one couldn't see cooped up in the miniature garden called the royal palace awaited Yodel with both arms spread open. And every time she touched those affairs she even thought about throwing away everything and leaving the royal palace behind to continue wandering the world as she was. The title of being from a house of prominent priests had absolutely no meaning in this wide world—.

But Yodel was now following the path back to the royal palace like this.

Because an order to return came down from the king. Of course, she was not simply obeying those orders blindly.

(If I can make use of the little truth I gained from touching the world.)

At that time, she tried to move the people's hearts in a mistaken fashion. But this time she would not make a mistake.

The meaning of returning to the royal palace was because there should still be something she needed to do as a priestess.

Yodel opened the eyes she had closed and etched firmly into her memory the scenery that spread before her.

About an hour later Yodel, and the priests who accompanied her, arrived at the central gates of the royal palace.

The same as half a year ago, when she departed stealthily, her return this time was greeted by a small number of people. This was Yodel's own request.

Yodel, without borrowing anyone's hand, got off her horse in a familiar motion.

"Everyone, I have returned."

While her companions on her long journey knocked lightly at their necks, she slowly looked over all the people who came to greet her. She couldn't see any change in the faces of the priests and officials who she hadn't seen in a long time. Although it had been a while, it was still only about half a year, and so that was natural.

"Welcome back, Lady Yodel."

The priests lowered their heads reverently. As Yodel returned that with a nod among the familiar faces was a single unexpected person who awaited her and she was inwardly surprised.

"It has been a long time— Lord Asyut."

When she called out that name and faced him directly, he showed a faint smile.

"Sister Yodel. I am glad you do not appear to have changed."

"Yes, thank you for your concern. However, I would not have thought you would be the one to come and welcome me."

"I sincerely apologize for surprising you."

"No, not at all. It is an honor."

As she answered Yodel began to lower her luggage that was fastened onto her horse personally, but that was immediately taken over by those who greeted her, and she and Asyut ended up entering the royal palace ahead of the others. This was also a strange stream of events. In the past, he had been someone who she had hoped to be of the same mind, but she herself had stepped off the path and he should have become an immensely distant being.

They slowly walked beside each other on a stone pathway that not many people used. The setting sun that shone in from the windows on the stone wall created long

shadows behind Yodel and Asyut.

“According to what I heard, many things seemed to have happened at the royal palace during my absence.”

Yodel spoke to Asyut while removing the clasp on the mantle that covered her.

She had heard that she recalled at this time due to the chaos. What was seen as a large problem in particular was the matter of the anti-saint faction’s uprising. Of course, Yodel had heard of this organization acting in the shadows from before. But to think things would develop to where they would truly attack the royal palace–.

For Yodel the dejection surpassed the surprise. In the past there was the attack by the young man she had used; this time there was the revolt of the anti-saint faction. Although there was a difference in scale, the underlying basis was the same. She couldn’t think of the two as separate things.

“During your absence, Sister Yodel, there truly has been many things that happened. However, many problems have not been settled as of yet. And I believe that is why the king recalled you.”

“If there is anything I am able to do then I would like to serve to all of my abilities... But there may be many who do not wish for that.”

Yodel lowered her eyes slightly.

As Asyut ascended the spiral staircase, he looked back at Yodel who was following him.

“Not at all. Rather, they require your strength.”

“Eh?”

“Presently, in the royal palace, the confrontation between the king’s faction and the priest faction has come to a head. Up to now the coals had been smoldering, but now it has become a situation that cannot be glossed over. If it continues like this, there is no doubt that the balance of the country will collapse.”

“What do you mean?”

The confrontation between the king’s faction and the priest faction– it was completely

news to Yodel.

“The king is trying to repress the excess authority held by the priests. And the priest faction is violently opposing that. In order to demonstrate their resistance, Lady Celiastina has been confined in the Priest Tower and hidden from the public under Father Roblin’s direction.”

“Absurd.”

Yodel came to a complete stop on her way up the stairs. The priests had confined Celiastina?

“That is not all. It has been disclosed that, in reality during this past year, the woman we had been interacting with as Lady Celiastina was a completely different person. That woman has disappeared and presently her whereabouts are unknown. Now, in the Priest Tower, is undeniably the true Lady Celiastina. Then, whose intention was it exactly to prepare a substitute for the saint? That this reason has not been made clear as of yet is one cause to the deterioration of the relationship between the king’s faction and the priest faction.”

“That’s...”

Impossible, is the shape her lips formed, but she quietly pursed them. It was suddenly an unbelievable story, but Yodel was unable to throw away Asyut’s words. Even as Yodel looked up at Asyut with wavering eyes, he only kept silent and received her gaze.

“Is this true?”

“You must have also felt it yourself during Duo’s matter. The clear difference from what Lady Celiastina had been like up to now. In actuality, it was really a different person. It seems that the true Lady Celiastina knows the details and so I intend to see her soon and inquire on this.”

“.....”

“Sister Yodel, please won’t you lend me your strength. I would like to request for your presence during my meeting with Lady Celiastina.”

Yodel was increasingly confused by Asyut’s outlandish request.

“By nature, this is matter that should have been resolved properly but Father Roblin’s refusal was stubborn such that nothing had been able to be done until now. Although a meeting with Lady Celiastina has been realized at last, Father Roblin has presented certain conditions.”

And that is to have the presence of a person from the priest faction at that spot, Asyut said.

“I am gravely conscious of how I should not be making this request on the spot of your return from your pilgrimage. However, I would ask of you to be the witness no matter what.”

“Because the other priests will impede on the meeting?”

“That as well. But, above all, it will be a conversation I do not wish for others to hear.”

“A conversation you do not want heard?”

Yodel pondered over Asyut’s words with her mind still in confusion.

“I apologize sincerely but I cannot tell you the details right now. It is something I cannot ask anyone but you, who is not under the influence of Father Roblin and has faced both the past Lady Celiastina as well as the substitute Lady Celiastina.”

Yodel swallowed back the many questions that tried to overlap one another at Asyut’s serious appearance.

The two Celiastinas.

What exactly were they?

(If I can know even one piece of truth then...)

There was no need to pursue it deeper now and would it not be better to accept being present?

Besides, even now she had a high opinion of Asyut and wished to answer his expectations. She was conscious that the matter of Duo’s attack in the past had greatly damaged Asyut’s trust towards her. He had surely scorned her at that time. Nevertheless, he was depending on her for an important event like this.

“...Though I believe I will agree, please allow me to consider this.”

Yodel carefully chose her words and answered thus.

“First, I would like to confirm all the facts. Will you allow me to think about the matter of being a witness again after I properly understand the current situation of the royal palace?”

“Yes, I understand. Thank you.”

Still, there was no doubt she could barely postpone this. The chaos of the royal palace he spoke of was probably quite deep and complex.

She was absent for only half a year. During that time, the state of things had greatly changed.

(What in the world happened.)

Yodel shook her head with no energy and, correcting her posture again, she began to climb the stairs with heavy steps.

The Priest Tower that was stepped into for the first time in about half a year was filled with an uncomfortable air, as if it were another person’s house.

From the beginning it was not a bright and lively place. However, even in its silence, there should have been a sense of absolute security that everyone’s hearts were directed towards God equally. Right now that was completely left out–.

It made her extremely uneasy for some reason. She couldn’t calm down. Even though she should have arrived at her home after her long journey, there was no feeling of having “come home”. Yodel was lead to the reception room and, as if to restrain her restless heart, she clasped both hands to her chest.

“You have come back, Sister Yodel.”

“Father Roblin.”

Yodel quickly unclasped both her hands and raised her head.

The person who entered the room was the person who Asyut had brought up earlier in his conversation, the priest Roblin.

Yodel took in a deep breath quietly.

“It has been a very long time. I apologize for my lengthy absence from the tower.”

“Do not concern yourself with that. Observing various things has turned this journey into a provision for you.”

“Yes, thank you very much. However, I heard that various problems have occurred in the royal palace during my absence.”

“Hmph. So long as that insolent man stands at the summit of this country, it was a path that was impossible to avoid.”

By insolent man he must mean King Ronbarno. To think Roblin would comment on the king of the country like that.

“What exactly happened?”

“To be concise, the king utilized the exalted existence of the saint as a political tool and deceived us. You must have already heard but, temporarily, Lady Celiastina was replaced with a substitute prepared by the king.”

“.....”

“The crime of having permitted those reckless actions is also with us, the priest faction. However, that is precisely why on this occasion we must protect Lady Celiastina. We cannot let the king carry on as he wishes. That man is trying to kick us down into the bottom of the ravine.”

“And Lady Celiastina is hidden– in this Priest Tower?”

Yodel chose her words with extreme caution.

“Correct. If not, the king would have tried to use Lady Celiastina again in a different form.”

“However, the king did not permit you to take Lady Celiastina.”

“Certainly, he did not nod to that. But he did not give permission because he is concealing wicked thoughts in his own heart. Because there is a guilty conscience, the king will be eager to steal back Lady Celiastina from us priests.”

Yodel could not find her next words and held her tongue.

She could not assert that Roblin’s thoughts were entirely a mistake. It was more than enough to think that, where that king was concerned, he had an ulterior motive regarding his treatment of the saint.

However– something caught in her chest. What was this sense of discomfort?

“This will be our critical moment. If we yield to the king now, there is no future for us priests.”

Roblin declared this in a strong tone.

“Sister Yodel, let us face this evil authority directly and fight together.”

Yodel’s mouth tightened. The reception room, whose design was based around the color white, suddenly felt like a cold prison.

“...I have just returned and have not gathered my thoughts well. Only, I am well aware that the situation is alarming. And I would like to devote my body, as long as it is useful, for the sake of God and the people.”

It took all Yodel had to answer with just that.

“For now, I shall give my greetings to the king. I have not reported my return yet.”

“No, there is no need for Sister Yodel to go.”

“Eh?”

Yodel unconsciously furrowed her brows at the words that were returned readily.

“The king may be thinking to make an ally with one of the influential priests. Having left the royal capital for a period, you with your ignorance on the circumstances are the most ideal. If you go to see the king, it is certain you will be won over to his side like that.”

“It is impossible for me to capitulate to the king’s authority. Please do not worry.”

“No, since before did you not collude with a person from the king’s faction while standing as a priestess? For the king, you are the most tractable priest.”

“Then, despite having returned on the king’s orders, I won’t greet him and act as if I do not care?”

“I shall report to the king. Sister Yodel, I will have you stand by in the tower like this for a while.”

–How unbelievable! Deep in Yodel’s chest an unspeakable anger bubbled up.

“Are you trying to imprison, not only the saint, but also me in the tower?”

She was unable to suppress her voice from becoming harsh. Roblin goggled before glaring at her, but she returned his glare strongly.

“I will go to the king with my own feet and report to the king with my own words. You do not have the right to stop me from doing that.”

“We are presently in an urgent situation. If we priests do not move as a monolith then we cannot oppose the king’s faction. If you act selfishly here, you will be a burden to everyone.”

“Who is acting selfishly here? When did the consensus of us priests become alike to your thoughts.”

“You may say what you wish. Because if they are mere words then it is easy to say anything. In the end, the question is how one can act based on one’s will. Those who cannot move have no right to stop those who move.”

Yodel unconsciously rose up.

Each one of Roblin’s words stabbed into her. Because in the past she too had the same thoughts as him and acted in the same way. In front of such a memory that she had done herself, she couldn’t help but overlay the past on top.

“Father Roblin, wait–“

“Sister Yodel, you are still too young and cannot see what is important. It is unfortunate but I cannot allow myself to be occupied with the selfishness of the youth. Until you can understand even half of my thoughts, I shall have you be quiet here.”

Roblin stood from his seat and, saying that over his shoulder, turned on his heel and left the room with rough footsteps. Yodel chased his back without a moment's delay but the moment she exited the door her path was blocked by a guarding priest. She looked up at the man with a glare but she didn't recognize his face at all. Although he wore priest robes, this priest had a sturdy physique that could match the soldiers of the royal palace and she couldn't feel anything but a sense of wrongness.

“Move.”

“I am deeply sorry but I must ask you to wait here, Lady Yodel.”

“Who are you? I haven't seen your face before.”

“I entered the tower during your absence, Lady Yodel.”

“Or perhaps you are a private soldier employed by Father Roblin.”

The priest guard stuck to silence but the answer was clear as day.

(Most likely it's not just this one. There must be many personal subordinates of Father Roblin in this tower.)

That Roblin had already disappeared. If he was heading directly to the king then Yodel could not stand here and look on with her arms folded.

“This is an order, move.”

“I apologize sincerely, but—”

“There should be no problem if I am within this tower. I am returning to my room. You cannot possibly be saying that even that is not allowed, right?”

She met eyes firmly with her opponent. The priest faltered slightly and she felt his gaze be shaken.

“I will say this once more, move.”

After an instance of silence that was suffocating, the priest showed a slight movement to withdraw. Yodel left that spot with quick feet, seeming to push away the other person. Yodel's personal room was in the upper reaches of the tower.

If she went up the stairs like this then she absolutely wouldn't be able to get out of the tower. From the beginning, Yodel did not intend to be confined obediently in her room. Without any hesitation, she stepped onto the steps that led to the hallway.

"Lady Y-Yodel! Where are you going."

The panicked guard's voice fell against her back but she didn't turn around. If she descended the spiral staircase with her back imposingly straight then what would be suspicious in the eyes of others would be the guard who, to all appearances, was chasing her. The gazes of the other priests who followed the two of them, wondering what was going on, slowed the man's footsteps. In that opportunity, Yodel came down the stairs and placed her hand on the door exiting the tower.

"Halt now, Lady Yodel!"

The guard's right hand was roused with impatience and strongly grabbed Yodel's shoulder. At the same time the open air of the night happened to come in from the opened door. Yodel deeply inhaled the damp smell that was characteristic of the night.

"I ask of you to please return. It is forbidden to enter or exit the tower without permission."

"As a newcomer I see that you do not know that I have been approved of as an exception."

As she sharply twisted and avoided the guard's right hand, his complexion changed. It was not that of a calm priest, but the face of a violent and rough man filled with rage. This was the true form of the private soldiers that Roblin prepared.

At this rate she would be brought back by force—.

In that moment.

"Pardon me."

Behind Yodel came the voice of a young man from just right outside the tower. When

Yodel startled and looked back, beyond the door stood a young man dressed in the uniform of the Order of Holy Knights. Blond hair and blue eyes, it was a very aristocratic-looking young man. Of course, it was not a person Yodel could not know.

“Ser Aeneas.”

Why are you in such a place, Yodel swallowed those words and stood still in that spot. Aeneas looked at Yodel, nodded, and then turned to face Roblin’s private soldier like that.

“You do not seem calm. What exactly is the matter?”

The man quickly corrected his posture.

“I have shown you an unsightly appearance. However, it is not something that needs to be discussed. More importantly, as a general rule it is forbidden for a knight to enter the tower.”

“I do not intend to enter. I have come to escort Sister Yodel on the king’s orders.”

“Lady Yodel?”

The priest’s voice became slightly low.

“The king is already aware that Sister Yodel returned today in the evening. As she has yet to greet him upon returning, the king became concerned about Sister Yodel. He stated that he would like to see her healthy figure by all means.”

“I am deeply sorry but Father Roblin has gone to have an audience with the king in replacement.”

“The king said he wished to see Sister Yodel’s face.”

“B-But.”

“Are you obeying Father Roblin’s orders and ignoring the words of the king?”

“.....”

He must have been unable to find words to respond with since the man fell silent. As

expected, even he seemed to acknowledge the difference of weight between the orders of a priest and the orders of the king.

“Let us depart, Sister Yodel.”

Aeneas called to Yodel without a moment’s delay. Yodel nodded and immediately left, following after Aeneas. The private soldier guard did not chase her outside the tower. It was forbidden to enter or exit the tower without permission– just like he said so himself, as long as he was staying as a priest, he was bound firmly by the rules of the tower.

“Ser Aeneas, thank you very much.”

While quickly walking on the pathway leading to the royal palace from the tower, Yodel called out to Aeneas who was beside her. If he had not appeared, there was no doubt that Yodel would have been brought back to her room by now.

“Not at all. If I was of help then that is fortunate.”

Aeneas answered humbly and showed a faint smile to Yodel. But it may have only been that the corners of his mouth twisted.

The series of events just now secretly overwhelmed Yodel.

Anything and everything was as Asyut said– no, the situation had fallen into a state beyond that. Roblin confined the saint in the tower and declared that he was opposing the king. He had clearly invited men who were not of the faith into the tower and used them as his own pieces. And then.

(I myself was about to be imprisoned in that tower.)

Yodel’s body gave a jolt and then trembled.

“Did the king also foresee this situation? And then had you, Ser Aeneas, to come...?”

“Ah, no, that is not the case.”

Aeneas’ tone instantly became evasive.

“It was convenient to say it was by order of the king. In truth, I happened to be there

by chance.”

He happened to be there by chance? What did that mean. She didn’t think a squire such as Aeneas had any business to come near the vicinity of the Priest Tower.

Perhaps that question appeared on Yodel’s face because Aeneas averted his eyes with embarrassment.

“...In truth, I am often near that area... when I return from work.”

“At the Priest Tower, you mean.”

Yes, Aeneas nodded.

“Although, even when I go, I am right before the entrance. Whenever I think about trying to free Lady Celiastina somehow my feet automatically head there. Though I know it is pointless no matter how many times I pass by.”

Aah, so that’s how it was. Yodel finally understood.

Even Yodel had heard of the story of how Aeneas adored his master, Saint Celiastina. Of course, it was also famous that in the past there was an extraordinary antagonism between them. That is why, for a long time, Aeneas was a person who was impossible to understand for Yodel. Why was he so easily able to forgive Celiastina? To the point that though she had little to no direct contact with him she thought about trying to ask him these, if she had the opportunity, along with thoughts of antipathy. However, now that she knew about the mysterious woman, she could understand just a little.

“Honestly, I am powerless. Always, there is nothing I can do.”

“That is not true. Because just now you saved me.”

This time it was Aeneas’ turn to smile wryly.

“Ser Aeneas, there are times where I also think myself powerless. But I will be sure to make use of this chance you have given me by saving me. To release Lady Celiastina from the tower and to take things back to the right path as a person devoted to God.”

Yodel stopped in that spot and told him this with force in her words.

Aeneas looked back and, after falling silent for a while, he gave a slow nod.

†

“Excuse me.”

Raising a voice that passed through noticeably, Yodel pushed open the doors leading to the audience hall with both hands.

She confirmed the state of the room that spread beyond the door distinctly with strong eyes. In this room, which was not very large, there was the king who sat on a throne on a platform and Roblin who was on a knee right before him.

“King Ronbarno, I sincerely apologize for my tardiness. I have come to greet you upon my return.”

Bowing her head deeply, Yodel proceeded to walk to the center of the room.

“Ooh, so you’ve come at last. I was growing tired of waiting.”

In direct contrast to the king who greeted Yodel with a voice that was bright to the point of lacking any tension, Roblin looked back and shot a gaze that was covered with surprise and anger at Yodel. Turning that aside calmly, Yodel stood next to Roblin.

“Hmhm, you have a nice complexion. It seems to have been a pleasant journey.”

“Yes, it was a journey where I learned many things. I thank you sincerely for listening to my selfish wishes and leaving in such a time.”

“I do not mind. More importantly, I had just received a report from Roblin that you were exhausted from your journey and asleep in bed, so I am relieved.”

Yodel looked at Roblin with a side glance.

“As you can see, I have more than enough spirit and vitality. I believe Father Roblin was being considerate towards me.”

“In any event, I must apologize for calling you back in the middle of your journey.”

“Nonsense, I do not dare to accept that. If there is anything I can do then it is my place

to make an effort to use all of my abilities, though poor they may be, for the sake of this country and our God. I believe it is my mission to serve beyond the barrier of religion and politics.”

When she stated that decisively, she could almost hear Roblin grinding his teeth from beside her.

She would not yield to Roblin. Having said that, she also would not yield to the king.

So to speak, this was a declaration directed to Roblin and the king.

Yodel bowed her head once more and then looked up at the king directly again.

The king showed a deep smile.

Chapter Three

Several days later, a message was delivered to Asyut from Yodel.

At that time, Asyut was glancing through the reports which had collected in his office. Even after Celiastina disappeared from inside the royal palace, his everyday routine continued– yes, on the surface.

Yodel's letter was brought to him by a messenger and, upon receiving it, Asyut broke the seal on the spot. In it was a concise message written in soft brush strokes about her consent to being present at the interview. Asyut gave a deep sigh of relief and sat down on a nearby sofa. His gaze dropped to the stationery in his hands once more before he closed his eyes tightly.

(So the interview is today.)

In the letter Yodel apologized for the suddenness but on the contrary it was a welcome development for Asyut. If it was possible, he would have liked to enter the Priest Tower right now, needless to say of a few hours later. Ever since Celiastina had been confined in the tower the days without any progress were much too long and vexing for Asyut.

Until it was time for the interview, he finished the word at his hands as much as possible. Nevertheless, due to the impatience he couldn't help but feel, he finished his word a little earlier than planned and left his office. In order to calm his impatience, he purposefully took a roundabout way to head towards the Priest Tower.

It had been quite some time since Asyut stepped towards the Priest Tower.

Thinking back, it had been since he sent off Celiastina to meet with Yodel. It was already more than half a year ago– at that time “she” was certainly beside him and, thinking about that, Asyut felt a strange feeling.

Asyut looked at the building in front of him and his feet came to a slow stop.

The sight seen from here was unchanged from before. A tall white building with countless small windows in its walls. Even the cool and strained air that rejected outsiders and seemed to observe them was all the same as that time. At the very top floor of this tower, which did not feel the flow of time, Celiastina was imprisoned.

Asyut looked up at the tower once and then placed a hand on the door that was shut perfectly. The large wooden door made a dull noise as it started to move reluctantly.

The inside of the tower was quiet. Was it because it was time for prayers? Or because there was a dislike for an outsider like Asyut to visit? Even the black robed priests which could be counted and went back and forth through the passages did not even meet his eyes as if he didn't exist from the beginning.

"Lord Asyut, I have been waiting for you."

From one of the several rooms that were lined up, Yodel's figure appeared. Immediately behind her, the disappointed figure of Roblin followed.

"Sister Yodel. I apologize deeply for my unreasonable request this time."

"No, I understand the situation well. Rather, I am glad you called out to me."

Yodel glanced at Roblin behind her. Looking at her gaze and the resentful expression of Roblin who received it, even a child could notice the painfully tense air that flowed between the two.

"Lord Asyut, I will ask of you to end your interview shortly. Although it is to bring the imposter saint before us, it is not our intention to put a burden on Lady Celiastina."

Roblin gave this warning in a thorny voice.

"That was my intention."

"Father Roblin, let us not stand around and talk. We shall be on our way now."

When Yodel told Roblin this flatly and coldly she exchanged looks with Asyut and they started walking. Roblin's tutting reached Asyut's ears but with Yodel's manner of how it was something that didn't concern her at all, it was like she didn't care. Asyut realized anew that this priestess had a boldness and nerves of steel that didn't suit her fragile appearance.

“Why did things become like this, I wonder.”

Yodel, who started climbing the long spiral staircase that ran along the walls of the tower, murmured this suddenly without turning around.

“Why can Father Roblin only display his faith in this form? It is truly regrettable. Even if things were done like this, God would not be pleased.”

“.....”

Asyut followed after Yodel in silence.

“Of course, I cannot say the king’s actions are correct. However, I believe Father Roblin has clearly lost sight of his path. Imprisoning Lady Celiastina in the tower arbitrarily is the height of his folly.”

Yodel’s voice echoed inside the tower indistinctly.

Contrary to her, Asyut felt his body become heavy with nervousness every step he went up. Celiastina was awaiting them at the end of this, and just thinking that almost made his legs unable to move as if they were hardened by plaster.

“Sister Yodel, have you already met with Lady Celiastina?”

“No, in truth, not yet. As you have said, Lord Asyut, circumstances have been pushed into even the tower and I have been unable to request a meeting.”

And then Yodel left a small pause.

“That is why I too am nervous.”

As they approached the top of the tower the stairs became narrower. At the same time, even the air drifting around the area felt like it carried a weight. Before he knew it, Asyut continued walking mindlessly.

And then, eventually, they arrived at the very top floor.

Yodel’s feet stopped at the landing stairs. The landing was small to the point where, if two adults faced each other, they would feel it was tight with just that. There was a brown door to the side. It seemed like it was not locked and Yodel opened it easily

with her delicate right hand.

Beyond that door a space that should be called a connecting space rather than a corridor continued. And then beyond that was another door.

“Lady Celiastina is over here.”

Yodel told him in a few words.

“I will not open my mouth at all. Please treat me as if I was not there.”

“I understand, thank you.”

Asyut turned towards the door directly and took in one breath. He recalled the instant he faced the true Celiastina, who he had not seen in a long time, several weeks ago. It was a meeting where the fact that he lost a person he could not lose was thrust clearly at him. But this time there was a decisive difference from that time.

This was a meeting connected to hope.

“Excuse me.”

Asyut called out in a quiet voice and slowly opened the door. In that instant, the soft fragrance of flowers tickled Asyut’s nose. On a shelf close to the door an arrangement of blue Roche flowers that the priests preferred entered his eyes.

The room was larger than he thought. Although it was not to the extent of Celiastina’s personal rooms at the royal palace, it was not small enough to feel inconvenience. However, it seemed like a room prepared by the priests who did not enjoy a life of grandeur, and overall it had a simple atmosphere.

He was able to find the owner of the room immediately.

Celiastina was sitting in a chair prepared in the corner of the room. Was that a scripture in her hands?

“I’ve been expecting you.”

Celiastina raised her head and closed her book together with a quiet voice.

“Please, go ahead and sit down.”

Invited by her, Asyut and Yodel sat in nearby chairs. Asyut found himself casting a searching gaze at the girl who also moved herself to sit facing them.

Celiastina’s appearance hadn’t changed at all from several weeks ago. She was wearing her usual white one-piece dress and a stole was loosely worn on top of that. Even her long golden hair, which reached her waist, was casually left down.

“I am able to meet you at last, Lord Asyut. The priests didn’t listen to me at all no matter how many times I requested this, so I must thank Yodel.”

Celiastina started talking in a light tone. It seemed Yodel really didn’t intend to add to the conversation as she only lowered her eyes slightly in place of a reply.

“But I’m certain now is the time to be moving. The king is also about to aggress on the priest faction, is he not?”

“Yes, most likely there is not much time left.”

Asyut answered like that and was inwardly surprised at himself for being unable to speak well. He felt awkward as if he was forcing rusty gears to move. Celiastina looked at that Asyut with a serious expression but soon lowered her eyes. Those long eyelashes created a faint shadow at her eyes.

“To be honest, I personally have no objections to spending the rest of my life in this tower. Although I am alive like this, I do not think it is to live a fruitful new life. Though, of course, I am grateful to Yuna’s efforts for my sake.”

Yuna.

Asyut’s shoulders trembled minutely at that name.

“Is she the person who was living in your place at the royal palace this past year?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Celiastina gave a firm nod.

“Yuna is a very large presence to me. Ever since I was young, and coming to this very

moment.”

Asyut straightened his posture and waited for the continuation of Celiastina’s words.

“I believe you already know, Lord Asyut, that originally I was an orphan living at an orphanage. At that time, there were a number of people who appeared at the orphanage to help out of goodwill. One of them was Yuna’s mother. Yuna was brought to the orphanage many times by her mother and she was my playmate.”

That was an unexpected fact to Asyut. There was this connection between Celiastina and Yuna from that long ago?

“It seems that Yuna herself didn’t remember that. Because we only played together for a very short time at the orphanage, it might not have left that much of an impression to a young child. However, to me she was special. And that is why I could never forget her.”

Celiastina’s eyebrows drew together slightly. It was an expression like she was enduring a dull pain– her emotions, for the first time, spread across her face.

“At the time I came to know Yuna, the twisted love from the director was already directed at me, and I was emotionally exhausted. My ability as the saint became strange and people around me also started to die around that time. The adults and other children began to leave a distance between me and them and I was tormented by a terrible loneliness. However, Yuna did not know those details and always cared about me. I suppose I became too dependent on her.”

She anxiously awaited the days when Yuna would come to play at the orphanage and ended up waiting for those days, praying and counting her fingers– Celiastina looked back at that time.

However, little by little, the opportunities for Yuna to go to the orphanage decreased. As Yuna’s mother became busy she was unable to help out at the orphanage as much, this is what was told to the young Celiastina. Every day after that, Celiastina told herself this hard. It wasn’t that she was hated and it wasn’t that Yuna distanced herself out of fear.

But was that really the case–?

Each time Celiastina told herself that “nothing could be done” the grinding in her heart

could not stop.

Eventually, Yuna didn't show up at the orphanage at all. But still Celiastina continued to wait. And, while she waited, she began to hold an irrational anger towards Yuna. Several years had passed since she had already parted with Yuna, but Celiastina was unable to forget her.

"By that time already, I could not help but think of Yuna not coming to see me as a horrible betrayal. I wasn't able to come to a clean explanation on how childhood friends were like that. Nonetheless, still, I thought that long time had managed to calm my complicated feelings towards Yuna. Before long, I ascended into the royal palace as the saint and began a new life."

Asyut knew well the things that happened after that. Just how Celiastina stepped off the path—.

"I thought I could do everything over again here. But that was a mistake. My distorted ability ruined many people even in the royal palace. I became aware of my own repulsive ability and despaired. In the end, I chose to end my own life."

Asyut could not say a single word. Once again, Celiastina's grand life was thrust directly at him and shook his heart quietly. That Yodel did not open her mouth must have been more that she could not get any words out rather than doing as she declared.

"I should have died like that. That should have been the end of everything for me. However, that did not happen."

"...That reminds me, she mentioned this. That due to an accident she was to serve as your substitute. However, from your story just now, it feels like she was not chosen simply by coincidence."

Celiastina's grim expression did not collapse. She raised her lowered eyes and those deep purple eyes held Asyut firmly.

"That is correct."

In order to endure an intense pain, she stared determinedly at one point. That was her gaze. Asyut, while feeling as if he were about to be sucked into those blazing eyes, was silent and received her look.

“I believe the cause of that, in the end, was me.”

Celiastina stood from her seat and took out a small box from the drawer of the shelf. When she opened the lid there was a single old ribbon inside. Asyut also remembered seeing this. Before, when he met Celiastina, it was something she had gripped in her hands.

“On the night I was to throw my body in the forest, I looked at this ribbon I received from Yuna when we were young, and thought about her for the first time in a long time. Why did Yuna abandon me? Why did Yuna never come to see me again? Things like that. Maybe if she had been the only one not to abandon me then I might not be trying to die right now...”

Unbelievable. The guess that crossed Asyut’s mind was hair-raising.

“My feelings towards Yuna, which had been sleeping inside me all this time, felt like an explosion. Violent, cruel, to the point where I could not stop it myself-. My twisted ability drew her in by force. On that day, I’m certain Yuna was hit by the carriage because of me.”

The ability to amplify the force towards death of those Celiastina connected with.

Asyut held his breath and took a long hard look at Celiastina.

“After that, even I do not know what it was that bound the two of us who should have died. Only, I felt that I was always beside Yuna after that. I watched from right beside her as she worked hard in being my substitute as Celiastina. At the beginning, there was nothing but pain. I hated Yuna so much as she passed her days with a face like she was accepting everything; when she was someone who didn’t know anything, when she was someone who didn’t remember anything. Working hard for me, who was returning one day- I wanted her to stop spending her days with that just cause in her heart, as if she knew everything. But I was wrong. Yuna did not live every day in passiveness.”

She did not just live a harmless and inoffensive life. She faced Celiastina and tried to “know” her.

“And, finally, Yuna found me. The real me that even I was unable to remember anymore-“

Celiastina held the ribbon in both hands and brought that to her chest.

“This time I wish to save Yuna. No, I have to save her.”

“But.”

Asyut managed to squeeze his voice out somehow while feeling his heart hammering like an alarm.

“Did she not die already when she was hit by the carriage?”

Celiastina stared at Asyut right in the eyes.

And then slowly shook her head.

“–No.”

It was a calm voice, but it carried her core.

“Yuna is not dead.”

Asyut listened, sharpening all his senses so that he would not miss even one word from Celiastina.

“She was certainly hit by the carriage and suffered serious injuries that brought her to the edge of death. However, she did not die. I felt that when I existed only as a soul.”

There was not a fragment of hesitation that could be seen in Celiastina’s eyes as she said that.

Aah.

Yuna was not dead.

She wasn’t dead–!

“Yuna has been sleeping all this time. Waiting for the time to wake.”

“Sleeping?”

“Yes. It is not a metaphor or anything else, she is simply sleeping.”

Asyut strongly gripped his own hands which had been trembling, unawares.

“Then what should I do.”

“Right now, I can feel that Yuna is very far away. I cannot wake her up like this. And thus, I would like to meet with Yuna directly. If I am able to face her properly, I am certain I can make use of my original power.”

“Your original power?”

Celiastina turned unwavering eyes to Asyut.

“It seems that Yuna thought urging plants to grow was my true ability, but in reality it is not. My true ability is– the power to nurture the life force of those I connect with.”

Asyut’s eyes widened.

“I myself did not know all this time. However, in this past year, I faced myself as just a soul and was able to feel my original power.”

“Nurture life force?”

“...Truly, what an ironic thing. My power once drove Yuna to the brink of death and, at the same time, my power has delicately fastened Yuna’s life to this day. However, I want to release that girl already. I want to save Yuna.”

Celiastina laid on strong words.

“Lord Asyut, I request this of you. Please let me meet Yuna.”

Even while he received her imploring look, Asyut couldn’t break out of his shock. Confronted with unexpected facts one after another, his head was in chaos.

Celiastina and Yuna’s relationship, the reason Yuna was “chosen” to be a substitute,

and Celiastina's original power. There had still been these unknown facts hidden. Even though he thought he had found out the deepest part, in the end what did he know at all.

However, even though he was confused, there was a part of him somewhere in his head that felt that everything was trivial.

For Asyut the most important fact was one thing.

The girl called Yuna was alive somewhere. Only that.

"Understood. I will ascertain Yuna's location immediately."

Asyut nodded firmly.

"Thank you, I leave this in your care. I can feel her presence growing smaller little by little. There is probably not much time left."

-No time. Asyut felt a cold sweat down his back.

"I can faintly feel that Yuna is sleeping very peacefully right now. I'm certain there are people beside her whom she trusts from the bottom of her heart. I believe she is at her home, but that presence is distant. It seems she is not in the vicinity of the royal capital."

"That being the case, where exactly..."

"Perhaps her parents still live in this town? Or they possibly moved somewhere."

I see, Asyut nodded.

"I will confirm this immediately. As soon as I know her location, I will definitely bring her here. But, until that time, you will have to continue waiting in this tower."

"I do not mind that at all."

"But I am worried about Father Roblin's movements. Sister Yodel, may I continue to borrow your power?"

He looked back and Yodel stared slowly at Asyut with a dazed expression.

“That is... yes... I understand. If there is anything I can do.”

Even in the midst of confusion, she seemed to have caught onto some parts of the situation from their conversation just now. Characteristic of her intelligence, she did not cut into their conversation and nodded.

“Lord Asyut, Yodel, thank you and I leave everything to you two.”

It was in the moment Celiastina bowed her head.

The door to the room was knocked on roughly and it scattered the air in the area, as if popping it. Before Asyut and the others could raise their voice, the person who pushed into the room was the person of their topic just now, Roblin.

“The time of the meeting is finished. It should have been more than enough.”

He said that as if snapping at them. It was written distinctly in the wrinkles of his drawn brows that he was unable to wait even a little more than this. And then, changing suddenly, he spoke to Celiastina in a gentle voice.

“Lady Celiastina, I deeply apologize for troubling you for such a long time. Are you tired?”

“No, I am fine. It was I who requested to speak with Lord Asyut.”

“And that conversation...?”

“It has mostly been settled. Lord Asyut will be bringing the aforementioned girl to the royal palace.”

Receiving Celiastina’s concise response, Roblin lowered his head reverently and quickly took a step back.

Asyut felt something catch in him faintly at that understanding attitude.

“Well then, Lord Asyut, Yodel. I apologize sincerely but, as I will be waiting here, I thank you again and leave things in your care.”

“Yes, I will bring her to you soon without exception.”

Asyut also took note of her feelings and stopped his reply at a few words. Standing up from his seat like that, he threw a formal bow at Roblin, and passed beside him in silence.

“Lord Asyut, I will escort you to the corridors.”

Accompanied by Yodel who followed behind him immediately, Asyut left the room.

As he left, Asyut quietly looked at Celiastina. There was a strong unwavering light resting in her purple eyes.

It closely resembled the figure of “her”, who he had seen many times in this past year.

Chapter Four

Asyut, who left the Priest Tower, parted with Yodel and headed to Linus with those legs.

There was no doubt that he would more or less know about Yuna's current condition.

It was that astute man, Linus, and so once he knew that there was another person's soul dwelling in Celiastina he must have immediately investigated their true identity. Asyut didn't know how much information Linus had grabbed, but he didn't think that Linus knew nothing at all.

Arriving in front of Linus' office, Asyut took a single breath before he knocked on that door.

"Please come in."

It was a calm voice that was returned. When he opened the door and let his gaze go around the room, there was the usual figure of Linus looking through one of the documents that were piled into a mountain with no change.

He was another man Asyut did not understand. It was a well-known fact inside the royal palace that Celiastina and Linus had an intimate relationship. Asyut had no way of knowing to what degree of intimacy that relationship was, but at any rate Linus should have been the most concerned person about the disturbance this time. And yet, to an outsider's perspective, he showed no sign of being troubled or worried and it was strange. It could be that he was forcing himself to keep up appearances though.

"I apologize for my sudden intrusion, but I would like to request some time to talk."

When Asyut told him this, the corner of Linus' lips lifted up in a smile.

"...What?"

"No, excuse me. I was thinking how, before, Celia would often push into my room saying "I'd like to ask something" or "I'd like to request something" and get worked up."

Please sit, Linus invited Asyut to a seat.

“I frequently remember things like this. About that girl who disappeared.”

In spite of Linus saying this, Asyut could not see his real intention. Did he genuinely miss Yuna? Or was he simply mocking Asyut who was moving about in confusion searching for her.

“I suppose it is no longer suitable to call that girl Celia. Should I call her Yuna?”

Linus put down the pen in his hand and, with a slow motion, rested his chin on his hand.

“I believe you went to the Priest Tower to meet Celiastina? Were you able to meet her successfully?”

“Yes, owing to Sister Yodel’s assistance.”

“I see, that is good then. I am also in a situation where I cannot visit Celiastina properly, you see.”

“So, Father Roblin turns a deaf ear even to you.”

“Oh, but of course. Rather, I must be an unpleasant sight to him since a long time ago. Despite being the son of a saint, I did not take up priesthood and instead follow the king’s faction as a civil official. It seems he’s always thought about wanting to separate Celiastina from me, and now that his wish is finally granted I suppose he is pleased.”

“However, it must be irritating for you, is it not. Are you not concerned about Lady Celiastina?”

Linus’ smile continued to show and his expression did not change.

“Of course I am concerned. But it is not as if her body is in imminent danger. The situation will not change even if I am impatient. On the contrary, the situation will change if the time comes without rushing. I only have to wait for that.”

“Why not act yourself and change the situation?”

“That is not my role. I believe there is a role for each and every one of us to do that is

decided. You have your duties. Things that you yourself should do; that you must do.”

The thing that he himself should do–.

Linus words pricked Asyut’s chest.

“Oh well. More importantly, you came to ask about the girl named Yuna, correct?”

“...Yes.”

Asyut instantly switched his mind to this topic. He leaned forward slightly from the sofa he was lightly sitting on.

“As you have reckoned, I have already investigated the girl who possessed Celiastina. When she was still here, she personally called herself Yuna, and so I was able to grasp her true identity.”

“So you were aware.”

“Well, as Celiastina’s guardian, I could not just leave an unknown being alone. Although, because that girl did not talk about herself often, my inquiries about her became quite late.”

“Then she is truly a real person.”

“It appears so. The only daughter of a family that ran a medicine store in a rural town a little distance away from the center of the royal capital. At that time, her age was eighteen years old. About one year ago, she was hit by a carriage in the town and died. Incidentally, this day is consistent with the day Celiastina planned to commit suicide.”

Linus recited this from memory as if in a song. There Asyut interrupted.

“Allow me to correct one thing. Certainly, she was hit by a carriage but she should still be alive right now.”

“Oh?”

He could spot a faint light in Linus’ eyes.

“How strange. In my subordinates’ investigation she should have undoubtedly died in

the accident though.”

“I was told this by Lady Celiastina herself just now. That, although Yuna is in a comatose state, she is still alive.”

“.....”

“It seems there is no reason, but a feeling. During this past year, while Yuna was living as Lady Celiastina, her soul was immediately beside Yuna. She spoke of how that is why she is able to feel Yuna’s existence even now. And that she would like to use her own power in order to wake Yuna who is in a coma.”

“Celiastina’s power, huh. It is not the ability to force people to death, I suppose?”

“Yes. It appears that Lady Celiastina’s original ability is to amplify the life force of those she connects with. In other words, the ability which had been active up to now has brought about the complete opposite effect of its original state.”

“.....”

Linus’ complexion did not change and he received Asyut’s words with a calm expression.

“...You are not surprised.”

When Asyut murmured this unconsciously, Linus gave a faint wry smile.

“Because I had imagined to some extent that Celia’s ability up to now was expressed in a distorted form. During the time Yuna was replacing Celia, it basically turned to a conviction; because Yuna’s power to nurture plants uncommonly strong. However– I see.”

Linus slowly lowered his eyes.

“In short, after this year where Yuna served as a substitute, Celiastina regained her original ability. That ability is to nurture the life force of those she connects with. And, with that power, she’d like to try and wake Yuna up from her coma. Is that how it is.”

“Exactly.”

“And you wish to go and pick up Yuna who should be sleeping somewhere right now.”

“Yes.”

But, Linus said as his expression suddenly clouded.

“That may be surprisingly difficult.”

“–And why is that?”

“As I said earlier, officially Yuna *died*. The ones who know Yuna’s location must be her parents, but even her parents moved out of their home in the royal capital and retired to the countryside in the sorrow of their deceased daughter. Right now they seemed to be living quietly in mourning at a town called Svet, which is a day and a half’s ride from here on horseback.”

Apparently, it seemed that Celiastina’s senses were on the mark. Yuna had most likely been taken by her parents and was now sleeping in Svet.

But there was one point that weighed on his mind.

“Yuna’s parents said their daughter died?”

“Yes. That seems to be what everyone around them said.”

Asyut lost his words at this unexpected situation.

It couldn’t be that Yuna was really–. No, there was no way. Did Celiastina not declare that she was alive? Even if there was no definite evidence or correct logic, Celiastina’s words were strongly supported in the miracle of this one year, in the miracle Yuna brought about.

But what sort of parents existed who would lie about their daughter being dead?

–He didn’t understand. What exactly was the truth?

“I think it is more than possible enough for her parents to lie.”

Linus turned his gaze into the empty air, as if he were sounding out something.

“Even though Yuna is really alive, they let their surroundings think her dead, and hid themselves in a rural town as a family. That may be the case.”

“What is the need for that?”

“If Celiastina’s words are the truth then Yuna has been sleeping for a year. If you think on that sensibly, it is a very strange phenomenon. It could even be said to be terrifying. Ordinarily, no one would accept such a phenomenon.”

If they were not of the same blood, Linus added.

Certainly, if the existence of their daughter who has been sleeping for a year were to be spread to their surroundings then there was a fear of being persecuted. Then it was possible that, holding those concerns, they concealed themselves.

“What will you do, Asyut.”

Asyut looked down slightly and clenched his fist.

However that was only for a short moment. He immediately raised his head and stared at Linus directly.

“I am going to meet them. Yuna’s parents.”

“You personally?”

“Yes. I wish to ascertain the truth with my own eyes and ears. I want to save Yuna.”

“But you cannot leave the royal palace so easily. No, even if you were to leave, what would happen afterwards would be a problem.”

Asyut himself knew well enough what Linus meant. Just a few days ago, Siecrest had pointed out the same thing.

He was the First Holy Knight. As someone who worked as a gear of the royal palace, he wasn’t permitted to break out from there on his own desires. Especially so in the present uncertain situation and those chains bound Asyut tightly all the more.

(Moreover.)

What did it mean for him to act for Yuna’s sake?

What did he intend to do after he acted? What should he do?

Inside Asyut's mind, he recalled the words Linus had spoken.

–You have your duties. Things that you yourself should do; that you must do–

(What is it that I should do.)

He didn't want to think that the title of First Holy Knight was a restriction. There was a part of him that, when the thought seemed to surface about wanting to be a simple human without status, shook his head and denied that. He came to this point believing that, no matter what sort of despair he was in, he could not make light of this duty only.

(Yes, even when I lost my relatives and sister, I didn't give up on being the First Holy Knight.)

Because it was the mission he imposed upon himself and the entire meaning of his life. At the end of that time which was like hell, he did not regret his own choice of remaining in the royal palace without a change.

(But what will happen in the future from here?)

He didn't know.

He couldn't see anything about what would be ahead.

What Asyut was chasing was just a single thin ray of hope.

(Still, right now I will move forward.)

Even in the darkness, as long as he did not stop walking, he might reach a place that was overflowing with that light.

That place might not necessarily be a paradise to Asyut. However, if it could wake Yuna then he would not care.

(For that, I won't hesitate even to defy the king.)

Asyut closed his eyes.

Inside his mind, that was long muddled by impatience and confusion, it was like a shore whose tide pulled back and everything cleared all of a sudden.

“–Tonight, when the royal palace has fallen asleep, I will leave.”

Opening his eyes again he told Linus this and the other man quietly held his breath.

“That is quite sudden.”

“Because I cannot be taken back. I intend to leave without telling anyone.”

“I believe you know but your position will worsen.”

“Yes. Even still.”

He was going to get back what he absolutely couldn't lose.

Asyut nodded to Linus with a strong determination.

Chapter Five

Asyut gently released a sigh that echoed quietly in the depths of his ears.

The crisp night air clung around his body as Asyut walked quickly on the pathway.

Dim lights that dotted the corridor created vague outlines of black shadows over and over again that saw him off as he passed them. Besides that, there was no one who knew that he passed by this place.

Every time he came to a corner Asyut looked around carefully. He quickly slipped his body into passages with few guards, so as to not catch any attention as much as possible. Repeating this many times, Asyut eventually arrived at the corridor that led to the courtyard.

A moon that was close to being full floated in the sky. Because of that brightness, the surrounding stars flickered with reservation. Asyut, who was illuminated by the moonlight, narrowed his eyes slightly as he looked up at the night sky. Right now, his body was clothed in simple travel garments.

The soldier who stood at the entrance to the lookout on the castle walls showed that he seemed to notice Asyut. Asyut, without breaking his calm, walked over there coolly.

“Good work.”

The guard straightened his posture and gave a bow to Asyut.

“I heard that Vice-captain Siegcrest was in charge of the east side security tonight. Where is he?”

“He appears to be confirming the security just now. Currently, he is at the top of this lookout.”

“I see. I’ll be passing through.”

The path was yielded to him and Asyut entered the lookout. He wasn’t carrying a lamp and so it was pitch dark at his feet. But still, there was no difficulty in going up the

spiral staircase he had come and gone through on countless occasions.

“Sieg.”

By the time he climbed to the top of the lookout, the moonlight illuminated the figure of the person he was searching for distinctly. Siegcrest, whose back Asyut stared at, turned around alertly.

“Oh, what, if it isn’t Asyut.”

Apparently, he seemed to be in the middle of receiving a report from a subordinate soldier. When Asyut glanced at the soldier, the soldier seemed to know enough and left the area.

“There’s something urgent I’d like you to hear.”

“What is it. Does it have to do with how that is nothing like your normal look?”

“That’s right.”

“Somehow, you look like a traveler who has skipped around to many places.”

“Yeah, I’m leaving the royal palace tonight.”

“...That’s sudden, hey.”

“Sorry for being late in telling you.”

Siegcrest gave what seemed to be a deliberate sigh.

“You found Celia?”

“Not yet. But I was able to grab a clue.”

“So...?”

“She seems to be in a rural town called Svet.”

“Svet... never heard of it.”

“It’s at a distance that’s said to take a day and a half from here on horse.”

“Wow, it’s that far. And you’re saying you’re going there?”

Asyut nodded.

“When will you be coming back?”

“I don’t know. I’m thinking as soon as possible though.”

“You prowling around alone at this time means it’s not a trip you got permission for, right?”

“Yeah, I haven’t received permission. It’s a completely selfish decision.”

“You know, you’re resembling me.”

Siegcrest said that and gave a smile that seemed to be amused somewhere.

“It’s not that I resemble you. I simply had no other choice.”

“But, if it was the usual Asyut, you wouldn’t say this. You’d say, acting without thinking of the consequences, what do you intend to do afterwards. No matter how you weigh this, it’s not going to fall in a good direction for you, the First Holy Knight, to decide on your own to slip out of the royal palace at this time. –Are you quitting as the First Holy Knight?”

Asyut lowered his eyes at the words of Siegcrest, who suddenly showed a serious expression.

“I wasn’t intending that.”

“Really? It looks like “maybe I’ll quit” is written on your face. But then again it’s dark and I can’t see well.”

The atmosphere suddenly became joking. But, on the contrary, it pulled out Asyut’s next words.

“To be honest, even I don’t know what I want to do.”

“...Aah.”

“It’s not that I’m concerned about the legends of disasters occurring in the country if the saint and First Holy Knight are lost. I think of the First Holy Knight’s position itself as something that is very noble. I wish to respond to the expectations and hopes everyone has sent to me up to now as the First Holy Knight. And those feelings haven’t changed since long ago.”

“Yeah.”

“But for me it’s not just that now. Yuna is also important... extremely.”

“Mm.”

“I’ve ended up thinking that I don’t want to lose either. I am acting right now, unable to give an answer, as I’m pressed in by the imminent time. As you’ve said, I am fully aware that moving to drag Yuna out to the royal palace again is very selfish though.”

He couldn’t pretend as if nothing happened. He couldn’t just pray from a distance for Yuna’s happiness and entrust the role of saving her to someone else. Even if his position as the First Holy Knight were to be put in a predicament he would not yield. But did that not mean that the existence of the First Holy Knight was being disrespected by none other than himself?

“Well, isn’t that a good thing.”

Asyut looked at Siegcrest and his indifferent words with a suspicious face.

“Asyut, you’ve changed a lot.”

“Changed, you say.”

“Because, up to now, no matter what happened you’ve chosen the First Holy Knight, right? Everything else is tossed out completely without any hesitation. I was seriously worried you were nothing but the First Holy Knight. But you’re deathly troubled right now. As a person you’ve acknowledged that Celia... no, Yuna, was it? That she’s important. Isn’t that a huge progress?”

“Is that the problem at hand?”

“Besides, you’re finally being vulnerable!”

Siegcrest looked happy as he wrapped an arm around Asyut’s shoulder. Leaned on by that giant body, Asyut staggered involuntarily.

“I thought it was about time for you to complain as much as possible. And I’ve been telling you all this time to rely on people more and let yourself be weak.”

“...I don’t remember this being said at all though.”

“Well, whatever about that. If you’ve faced your feelings up to that point, then all that’s left is to try and act. Anyway, try doing what you can with all that you have and you might naturally find the answer.”

Asyut did not reply with any words and only stared up at Siegcrest.

“Go on. Until you’re back, I’ll protect the place you belong to the last.”

Disregarding the troubled person in question, Siegcrest alone had a bright face. Asyut, while not feeling fully satisfied with everything, expressed his gratitude in his heart for his best friend who pushed his back.

His confident smile was more encouraging than anything else.

“Yeah– I’m going.”

Siegcrest nodded with a large grin.

Asyut picked up the horse that he asked Neisan to prepare in advance close to the west gate.

Though he conveyed that any horse was fine, the one tied to the trunk of a tree and standing obediently was none other than Asyut’s favorite horse. Although it’s glossy coat blended mostly into the dark night he could see, even from afar, that it stirred happily when it noticed Asyut.

From a rough glance, it seemed that the bare minimum necessities for travel were already fastened to the horse’s back. Asyut’s horse, though accustomed to the weight

of gorgeous ornaments, was experiencing carrying this practical luggage for the first time. With a feeling of apology and gratitude, he stroked that back with a firm hand.

When he went to the west gate, straddling his horse, of course there were guards here as well.

The guards showed caution at the sudden appearance of a man on horseback, but when they realized it was Asyut this time they showed a completely different confusion. Why did the First Holy Knight show at this time, even more with preparations for going afar-. Asyut calmly looked down at the men who faltered and told them this briefly but clearly.

“By the king’s orders, I am leaving the royal palace for the time being in order to receive the girl who has served as the saint’s substitute in this past year. During my absence, I want each and every one of you to carry a sense of duty and ensure the security of the royal palace.”

“T-The king’s?”

The guards murmured this, their bewilderment deepening more and more. Because there were no directions in advance, it was natural they were unable to understand the situation without difficulty. But, uncaring about this, Asyut passed by them.

Of course, they would report this matter to their superior immediately. And then that superior would consult with their own superior. Finally, there was no doubt this matter would pass through to King Ronbarno.

At that time, how would the king approach this?

In a sense, this could be said to be a declaration of war against the king too.

Regardless of the king’s plans, Asyut would wake Yuna without exception. For that, he would not hesitate to involve the king. If the king were to try and erase Yuna’s existence, then Asyut was willing to confront him on the opposite side.

In any event with his proclamation right now it could be said that, regarding his departure without notice, it was confined to the king who was the only one taken into consideration. And so, it was not a departure “without notice”. Asyut had declared that

it was by the king's orders. Then, naturally, the people would seek an explanation of the situation from the king. The problem started from there.

Would the king throw away Asyut?

Or would he accept Asyut's nonsense and try to keep the First Holy Knight by his hands even more?

(Even if I think about it now, answers won't come.)

Asyut lightly kicked the sides of his horse as if to shake off those thoughts.

The consequences would become clear when he brought back Yuna.

His horse continued running like that with great force.

†

(The day will be breaking soon.)

By this time it was several hours since he departed from the royal palace.

Asyut adjusted the cloak that was caught by the wind on his shoulders again and, while gripping his horse's reins, looked up at the sky.

Because the time was what it was, he couldn't see any people at all in the small towns outside the royal capital. Only the uninterrupted sounds of the bugs heard from the grass and the rhythmic hoofbeats of his horse resounded reservedly in the quiet outskirts.

Thinking about it, it was a first experience for him to travel alone like this.

Up to now Asyut had never known of the world outside of the royal palace. Of course he would go afar sometimes, but on those occasions he was always accompanied by someone. Not being limited by someone and acting on his own will was in and of itself unusual for Asyut.

When he pulled the reins slightly, his horse shook its head a little. It may have sensed that the journey from here was not common with how Asyut sometimes showed an appearance of discomfiture.

Although having said that it was night, on the highroad just outside of the royal capital he could see people now and then. The majority of them were merchants bringing in their goods to the royal capital for business. For the merchants having come here from far away, it didn't matter if it was morning or night. Even as Asyut passed them along the road, there was no one who paid attention to Asyut who seemed to be in the middle of a long trip. Various kinds of people came and left from the royal capital. Even Asyut right now was nothing more than a part of the scenery to them.

As he watched the landscape pass by on top of his horse, Asyut's mind went to completely different matters.

The words he exchanged with Siegcrest not long ago repeated in his head many times.

–I was seriously worried you were nothing but the First Holy Knight.

Precisely because it was this time right now that he couldn't help but think about these words.

(It's like Sieg said. I really am nothing but the First Holy Knight. If I was told to choose just one thing that was most important to me then, up to now, I would have answered being the First Holy Knight without hesitation.)

In order to respond to the people who supported and believed in him.

He thought that he could sacrifice everything else.

(Come to think of it, I was also told the same thing by my sister Milifaire.)

That he had abandoned his dignity as a person and was a pitiful man clinging to power.

He immediately answered at the time that she was mistaken and that wasn't the case. It was the same even now. He was not in this seat for power. It was because things happened with Saint Celiastina that he alone would raise his head firmly and stand in front of the people–.

(That's right.)

Dimly, he could see inside his heart.

The long chaotic days they had lived their lives until now. It was like that from the time

he was old enough to understand things. For Asyut, for the people around him, and for the country's people. The previous saint was one who tended to be ill. Her husband, the First Holy Knight at the time, had died early due to sickness and it was an age where people could not find any hope at all in the saint and First Holy Knight. It was in such a period that Asyut was raised.

That might have been why.

That he, especially in his generation, would try to become a First Holy Knight and saint that could make everyone smile. He swore that to his child's heart on that day. And it became shackles like that which solidified sturdily around his own body.

Every day when he was very young people, whose faces he did not even remember, would say to him one after another.

–Please become a fine First Holy Knight.

–You are the light of hope.

–When I watch your growth, I can be confident that the future is bright.

Those words tickled Asyut's ears like a curse. Even now, in this very moment.

(I had forgotten.)

–As long as you are here, Lord Asyut.

He suddenly looked up at the sky.

In the night sky he saw from atop his horse there were countless stars, that would not pause no matter how far he ran, and they would glimmer even to Asyut's destination. Even if he closed his eyes, those stars would not disappear from overhead.

–Ah, I see.

The radiance of these stars were too dazzling.

And that was why he couldn't throw away this position.

Even in this moment of seeking Yuna and absconding from the royal palace like this, he was unable to throw off the cloth of the First Holy Knight himself. He couldn't betray them; the people's expectations and their hopes.

†

The path after that was very smooth.

Soon the day broke and, under the bright sun, he rode through the path that rose like a wave. While passing through several towns scattered along his way, he determinedly continued to ride through the soft dirt of the plains. Even in the town he dropped in for a short break, there was no one who saw through to Asyut being a knight of status who came from the royal palace.

The scenery he saw on his horse was an unchanging carpet of grass for a long time. Instead, it was the color of the sky that changed distinctly over time. The near transparent light blue sky of the morning eventually changed to dark blue and then, as his horse continued to run, started to bleed red little by little until finally it stained dark red.

When he arrived at a small village he grabbed lodgings for that day and departed early next morning. He would arrive at his destination of Svet after passing through one more small village. Due to his good progress, it seemed he would arrive just before noon.

He did nothing but ride his horse.

Riding single-mindedly through an empty field it felt like he had become the wind.

Before long he passed through the last village and then went through one more field.

And, at last, he grasped a small village that was spread out in the distance.

—It was the town of Svet.

Chapter Six

Exactly as he heard, it was a small town.

Although, with that being said, it wasn't a terribly disused and lonely town. Dull amber buildings stood side by side and there were stone pavings connecting the buildings with beautiful patterns. The residents walking on top of that generally had a good appearance and weren't much different from the people of the royal capital.

A thick smoke rose to the sky from the chimney of one building and the fragrant smell of baking bread crossed the noses of people who walked past it. Among all the buildings that were short in height, a conspicuously tall tower in the distance could be glimpsed. That was surely the church of the town.

Asyut got off his horse and began to walk through the town while looking around at his surroundings.

It was the most lively time right before noon. There were many people on the street. It seemed, as much as he could see, there weren't any other travelers like Asyut to be found. Perhaps they weren't used to receiving travelers, but the gazes from the people that passed by were somewhat sharp.

(I guess I'll find an inn first.)

He'd stand out too much if he wandered around this town while leading his horse. Thinking that, Asyut asked an elderly person he passed on the road for the inn's location. The elderly person glanced at Asyut and then averted their eyes in displeasure, only giving him a curt response of "go straight and you'll see it on your left".

The inn he was told about appeared to be the only one in town, and so he would stay there whether he wanted to or not. It was a small inn that was ran by a married couple. It didn't seem to consist of just lodgings and the first floor was said to serve meals to the residents of the town as a restaurant.

He was allocated a room on the second floor and though it only had simple things such as a hard bed and a table with legs he had no complaints because he thought it was

fine so long as he could sleep. When Asyut placed his luggage there and descended downstairs, he was offered tea from the owner's wife. It was almost noon but there were no customers inside the small store. As Asyut took the seat he was offered, the owner returned after having gone to fasten Asyut's horse at the back of the house.

"That's quite a good horse you've brought along there."

Asyut gave a vague smile at that admiring voice.

"How long do you plan on staying in this town?"

"I haven't decided yet. I've been traveling to various places aimlessly and I thought I'd set out when the feeling struck me."

It was the answer he had thought about in advance. If he exposed his identity poorly in this town that was unaccustomed to travelers, he would only stir up unnecessary caution.

"Aah, I see. No, but I think you'll soon grow tired of this town. At any rate, it's really a town with nothing."

Having said that the owner smiled wryly. His wife, who appeared from behind after preparing the tea, took over after his words.

"The people in town aren't used to welcoming travelers who came from other parts, so I hope they won't say or do anything to displease you."

"They're all country people, so we would be grateful if you let their comments pass by easily."

They were truly in the service business and were also friendly to Asyut. The thought crossed his mind that, if it was these two, it might be good to try asking about Yuna's parents. However, Asyut immediately changed his mind thinking it was still premature.

For now, first, he should learn about this town by himself.

If he acted in haste, he would end up taking a roundabout way. This place was the critical moment and Asyut told himself to act calmly.

After a short while, Asyut went out into the town again.

The first destination he chose was this town's church. When he confirmed its location with the owner of the inn, it seemed like it was the tall tower he saw at first like he thought. A church was something that sat at the center of any town. It had to be kept there.

Although his luggage was left at the inn and he came out light in weight, the probing gazes of the residents along the road were still the same. Every time he passed someone the conspicuous way their eyes turned to him didn't feel very nice. In the royal palace, whenever he crossed paths with nobles, it was polite for them to lower their eyes, so the unreserved gazes probably weighed on him excessively. Maybe one of the reasons was that Asyut's walk and the way he carried himself was unlike an ordinary person.

Well, there was nothing he could do about it even if he minded. It wasn't as if stones were being thrown at him. Asyut came to that decision and, conversely, observed his surroundings as he walked on the street.

Right now what Asyut was walking on seemed to be the largest street in this town. That road, covered with beautiful paved stone, continued ahead drawing a gentle bend. Although it was somewhat conservative to call it a main street, it had more flavor than the streets in the royal capital which only extended straight in a uniform fashion.

Among the houses that were lined up in a row there were various stores that peeked out: a bakery, a butcher's shop, a tailor, and a general store. None of them were particularly bustling but he saw stores deep in conversation with what seemed to be regular customers. There were also residents inside who closed their mouths the moment they noticed Asyut and, when he passed beside them, they resumed their conversation in the same way. Most likely their conversation topic changed to who the young man who passed by just now was.

Shortly thereafter, the church he was aiming for came before him.

Asyut was thankful that, because it was a tall tower that caught one's attention no matter where one was in the town, an outsider like him could arrive at it without

getting lost.

He went up a gentle slope and into the church grounds. A small graveyard spread out beside the building. Every tombstone was quite damaged, having been exposed to the rain and wind for many years, but the dull scenery was colored brilliantly due to the flowers attached to their side.

Asyut headed directly to the church doors while looking sideways at the graveyard.

He placed his hand on the heavy door. In the church, where deathly silence came back at him, there were no preceding visitors.

Inside the dim light, Asyut walked to the altar as if he were being drawn in. A calm feeling similar to relief spread inside Asyut. For him, where it was a daily routine to offer prayers to God, the place in front of an altar was as calm as always, no matter what remote countryside church it was or not.

“Hello, you are a traveler, are you not?”

At that moment the figure of an elderly man appeared from the aisle beside the altar. He was passed sixty years in age and, wearing a priest’s robe, he came walking over with both hands clasped behind his back. Asyut, who had thought no one was here, had tensed unknowingly.

“–Yes. I apologize for entering without permission.”

“I do not mind. This is a church, not a place where you need permission to enter after all. As you can see, there is no one here right now either.”

“Is it like this normally?”

“Yes, that’s right, it is always quiet. If I had to say if anything was strange, perhaps it would be a traveler having come to this town.”

“The owner of the inn also said that.”

“This must be a boring town for a young man such as you.”

“I’ve only just arrived and so I do not quite understand, but I think it is a calm and lovely town.”

“Why thank you very much. Indeed, tranquil and peaceful may be said to be this town’s most redeeming feature.”

The priest showed a smile that deepened his wrinkles.

“I will be withdrawing to the back but I do not mind if you stay here until you are satisfied. –May God keep you on your journey.”

“Thank you very much.”

While lowering his head lightly, Asyut looked at the aisle the priest left through. If this deserted church was an indication and religious faith was not rooted in this town then it may be an easy environment for Yuna’s parents to live in. Believing in God meant worshipping the saint. Any “miracles” or “strange” things that happened outside of that would be shunned by people in general.

(I see, so Lord Linus’ thoughts fit the most.)

Or perhaps it was his heart that wished to believe Yuna was still sleeping even now that made him feel that way.

In the end, Asyut did a lap around the small church and left the place. Right at that time, the residents of the town entered the church with their parents and children so he was hesitant to remain there any longer. Asyut went outside and looked up at the church once before slowly going down the slope.

Well, what should he do now.

Of course, he wanted to search for clues about Yuna but, to his regret, he was lacking too much information. At the very least, he should do something about not knowing the location of Yuna’s parents.

(That’s right... For example...)

It was said that Yuna’s parents ran a medicine shop in the previous town they lived in.

In that case, it was more than enough to entertain the possibility that they would have a similar store in this town.

(If I visit stores related to medicinal herbs or medicine then it might lead to Yuna's parents.)

With those thoughts pushing his back, Asyut stepped forward into the town.

–However, certainly, just as the owner of the inn and the elderly priest said, this seemed to be a town that had nothing.

The more he walked through the town the more Asyut experienced their words. There was not one factor to be found to have outsiders bother in coming here. To the utmost only the scenery of the “life” of the people spread out; to the extent where he had the illusion that yesterday, today, and even tomorrow would have the same exact days be repeated.

Asyut, who had continued walking for a while, concluded that finding the medicine store on his own would be difficult. Having no choice, he tried asking the residents whether there was a medicine store or not. Although every one of the residents he spoke to had suspicious expressions, they told him there were three medicine stores in total in the town. Three– more than he had thought. It looked like he was mistaken in thinking it'd be easy because this was a small town. If, there were already these medicine stores from the start, Yuna's parents may have given up on running the same business here.

(No, nothing can be done even if I think about it.)

Asyut immediately switched his mind and decided to visit all three stores he had been told about.

One building was a shop managed by a young couple. Considering their age, they couldn't be thought of as being Yuna's parents. Browsing lightly inside the store, he left and headed towards the other store which was, conversely, being tended to by an elderly woman who was up in her years. He listened to her chat and it seemed that after her husband died before her she managed this store alone. This was also not it.

That being the case–.

While restraining his impatient feelings, he made his way to the remaining store.

However, on this day, that medicine store was closed down. Although he tried to ask the residents who passed in front what the owners of this store were like he was treated coldly and told to come again tomorrow when they should be open.

That's right, he should just come back tomorrow.

He told himself this when his impatience became increasingly worse. It was alright; was he certainly not advancing forward little by little? Tomorrow he would be able to take a further step forward.

Going once around the town, Asyut returned to the inn in the evening.

He noticed this while walking but he didn't see many men in the town who were in the prime of their lives. It was likely they left to earn money in the neighboring large town. He felt like he understood the reason why this town tended to be cautious about outsiders. It was because the men, who protected this town, were absent during the day that those remaining braced themselves and kept a watchful eye on their surroundings. So that they could deal immediately if someone made even the smallest suspicious movements–.

As if to prove that, after the sun set the atmosphere of the town threw off its reserve entirely and changed.

The restaurant of the inn where Asyut stayed changed into a bar at night and welcomed the men, who were returning home from work, one after another. Even the inside of the store, when business was slow in the noon, became fully occupied in the blink of an eye.

"Business is booming, isn't it."

Asyut, who sat down in the corner of the store to take dinner, called out to the owner just as he carried out drinks.

"Aah, in this town there's just us and one more place as bars. Only dirty men gather here and I'm so sorry for that."

The owner of the inn scratched his head while smiling wryly. But, though he said that, he seemed happy.

The "dirty men" according to the owner seemed to be enjoying their own beers while

watching Asyut and the owner's exchange at a distance but, as time went on, curious eyes unabashedly turned to him. As soon as they seemed to whisper something to each others' ears, guffaws followed after– there was no doubt they were getting excited at the topic of an unfamiliar traveler.

Eventually, one of them moved.

Holding three large beer mugs with both hands, a man sat somewhere right in front of Asyut. From his red face, it was clear he was already drunk.

“Hey, mister, haven't seen your face before.”

And then he placed one beer mug in front of Asyut.

“This is on me. Let's have some fun and drink.”

As he couldn't see any dislike in the man's voice and expression, Asyut thanked him honestly and took the beer mug. Joining the man's happy voice as he said cheers, Asyut gulped down the beer mug. It seemed just doing that put the man in quite a good mood.

“Where'd you come from?”

“Originally, I come from a town close to the royal capital, but recently I've been traveling here and there as I please.”

“Ooh, you really do have that city person feel! Nice of you to come to this remote town.”

“I think it's a nice, quiet, and gentle town. It's maintained beautifully and clean everywhere. It must be easy to live in.”

“Oh wow, you've said some nice things!”

The man pounded Asyut's shoulder strongly across the table.

“But the people in town must have been cold. It's 'cause they're not used to people from outside.”

“That is unavoidable. It's an expression of how everyone will try to protect this town.”

“Yeah, yeah, you get it completely! We gotta protect ourselves by ourselves. Both the king and God won’t protect us!”

The beer mug was struck against the table with force and its contents seemed about to spill out. Although he was hiding it, those were unthinkable things to say to Asyut who was the First Holy Knight. However, rather than it being nonsense said due to intoxication, the man must have been the kind of person who was outspoken from the start. He was a kind that hardly existed in the royal palace but to Asyut, who continued to socialize with an exception like Siecrest, the man was extremely easy to handle, and preferred.

(It really is completely different from the royal palace.)

This man– or rather, every single thing that surrounded Asyut right now.

He thought that everything was fresh and interesting. But, somewhere, he couldn’t get used to it. There was a sense that the world was separated by a single thin membrane, to the point where he wondered if the red-faced man in front of him today was sitting in front of Asyut in reality.

“Mister, you can drink quite a bit, huh.”

“Then this next one’s on me.”

Not noticing that Asyut was somewhat distracted, other men also became amused and started to crowd. There were those who threw casual questions such as how long he was staying in town and where he was going after this, but there were also those who sent completely trivial questions such as what his favorite foods were and how many siblings he had. At this rate, it seemed like he’d drown in a sea of questions. Asyut could do nothing but smile at the men who drew near with a sociability that couldn’t even be compared to the residents during the day.

For Asyut, who knew only living as the First Holy Knight, this time he spent as a young man with no title, neither a knight nor a noble nor a government official, gave rise to a strange feeling. It was different from being happy. It was also different from being enjoyable. Bemused– might be the expression.

(But, if...)

If, after the antagonism with Celiastina several years ago, he had thrown away his

status and flew out of the royal palace, he wondered if he would be wholly accustomed to a lifestyle like this right now?

“Mister, try drinking this beer too. It’s good.”

“Still, you’ve got a handsome face. Are you a famous minstrel in the city or something? Give us a song.”

“Hey, hey, don’t ask for unreasonable things. Instead, I’ll sing.”

“No way! The beer I’m enjoying will turn bad!”

Suddenly laughs broke out. The owner’s wife, who was carrying a meal to Asyut, gave an apprehensive smile to Asyut.

“I’m sorry, they’re noisy. If you want to have your meal calmly, I can carry this to your room.”

“No, here is fine.”

Asyut shook his head lightly. And then, at the same time, he rallied his feelings.

There was a reason he was staying in the restaurant while being teased by the lively men. Asyut was listening carefully to the gossip of the customers. If they were drinking, he thought there was a possibility of an unexpected topic being brought out as a side dish to the alcohol. It didn’t have to be a topic that related directly to Yuna. No matter how miniscule it was, if he could obtain any information–.

However, in the end, his expectations did not come to fruition. No matter how he strained his ears, he couldn’t hear any sort of information like that. What they talked about happily were things related to the events of the day and how they would spend their next holiday. And, above all, things related to the mysterious traveler who suddenly came to town.

“Hey, mister, why’d you drop into this country town? I heard you’ve traveled to many places but still I don’t think you’d normally come here.”

“There’s no specialty-like specialties here. If you’re on your way to a big city somewhere, there’s a more convenient town that’s close to stop by.”

“Ah, mister, wait! Don’t answer yet, I’ll guess... Hmm, is what I thought, but I can’t come up with a good answer. Maybe you’re being chased by officials or you’re shirking a debt and ran out at night.”

“You have no imagination at all.”

“He doesn’t look like he’s running away from committing a crime.”

“But they say you can’t judge a person by their appearance.”

As all the companions made noise they hummed and hawed and thought right in front of the person himself.

“Ah, that’s it! I know, you’ve come chasing a woman you fell in love with!”

One of the drunkards raised their voice loudly. Asyut blinked twice, three times, and revealed a smile without warning.

“...You’re perceptive, aren’t you.”

When he answered like that the surrounding excitement rose higher.

“Ooh, really? Woah, woah, woah, who is it, this woman.”

“It must be a pretty beautiful woman for someone like you to be chasing after her. But is there such a beautiful woman in our town?”

“Guxul’s daughter is quite pretty. She’s got a good figure too.”

“Eh, really? I think Nastha’s nice.”

“Isn’t she a mother of three now? Is that what you like?”

The topic quickly went astray and digressed. Asyut sunk into his thoughts again as he watched the men display fervent speeches at the parts that slightly differed.

He had come this far with the resolve to chase her anywhere. He wrapped himself in slightly dirty traveling clothes, visited this small town he did not even know the name of all alone, and was drinking beer while surrounded by unfamiliar men. And, just now, it was guessed right by a person he had only exchanged a few words with that he was

chasing a woman he fell in love with– it was truly a strange thing.

“Hey, mister, what are you spacing out for? It’s too early to be smashed.”

A new cup was placed in front of Asyut who had fallen silent.

“This time it’s my treat. I won’t accept winding things up if you haven’t drank this area’s local specialty.”

Raising his head, a giant who seemed one size larger than Siegcrest took up a position opposite of Asyut. Asyut reached for the drink that was on the giant with a wry smile. Apparently, it didn’t seem like he had the luxury to be deeply moved.

And so, the first night of his visit to Svet, advanced like this.

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The next morning, Asyut finally opened his eyes when he was woken up by the owner of the inn.

It appeared that he had slept soundly all night on this bed he could not even flatter by saying it was comfortable. It was when he was asked whether he would like lunch prepared instead of breakfast by the owner that he learned for the first time it was a time close to noon. He had never experienced this before and so Asyut’s surprise was so great that he was dumbfounded in bed for a while.

Taking the owner of the inn up on his offer, Asyut took a slightly early lunch, and then immediately went out into the town again. Today was the day he intended to make his way to the medicine store that Yuna’s parents managed. Exiting the inn, the sky that he looked up at was as clear as always.

“Heeey, mister!”

As he walked down a gentle hill he was suddenly called out to up ahead. Raising his head, he saw two men walking up to him with their hands raised.

Asyut immediately noticed that these were two young people he knew by sight.

“You two are from last evening.”

“Yep, yep, we drank together! So you remember. Are you taking a walk or something?”

One of the young men who stopped in front of Asyut, an oval-faced man with hair cut short, asked him this in a light manner.

“Something like that. Are you two on your way to work?”

“Yeah. We’re carpenters. Today we’re doing some repair work on a building in this town for the first time in a while. Right now, we’re taking a short break.”

There, the other young man, who had unruly hair and held back beside his friend, suddenly clapped his hands as if he remembered something.

“Ah, no way! Are you going to see the girl you’re chasing that you mentioned at the bar?”

Was it that topic again even without alcohol? Asyut smiled wryly while feeling astounded.

“Not exactly because I can’t quite meet the person I want to see.”

“...You...”

The oval-faced young man drew back his smile unexpectedly and stared hard at Asyut.

“Joking aside, you really came to this town chasing someone?”

For an instant he was at a loss as to how to answer. But, in the end, he nodded honestly.

“...Yes.”

“And no matter how much you want to see them you can’t see them?”

“Yes.”

“Is it a person with some kind of situation?”

Asyut gave a strong nod again.

“...I see.”

The other man responded back with an awkward noise. The unruly-haired young man, who was watching from beside them, looked between the two as if he were troubled. He pulled on his partner's sleeve and lightly pressed him about how they had to go now.

"Geez, don't go pulling a depressed look. You'll trouble this mister."

"Y-Yeah, you're right."

"Well, we gotta go now since our break's short. Let's drink together again at the bar."

"Alright, see you."

The young men regained their mood and left the place with easy smiles.

Asyut, who watched their backs for a while, eventually gave a quiet sigh. In this tranquil and calm town there were these sociable and amiable men. On the other hand, this town happened to have a cold expression towards outsiders. Yes, it was a town with two faces.

And just now he felt like he had gotten a glimpse of a deeper part.

(They know something. Something— something is here. In this town.)

Was it no more than optimism to think that it was the "answer" he was seeking after?

After that, Asyut started walking again and experienced the event of being called out to by the residents several times. "My husband said that he drank with you yesterday" "If you don't mind, come to our store next time"— like that they showed bashful smiles to Asyut.

He recalled in the past how Siecrest boasted that he could become friends with anyone after a night of drinking. Apparently it seemed that wasn't an exaggeration. Far from that, he was able to close the distance even with people he hadn't drank with, so the world was a mysterious place.

Thankfully, he was able to ask questions regarding the medicine store he was heading to from one of the people who called out to him. He was told that the store was

managed by a married couple in their forties and that they seemed to have moved in from somewhere several months ago. Their medicine worked quite well on sicknesses and external wounds and so they had some reputation.

(It's likely that...)

They were the parents of Yuna.

As he went down the hill road that was drawn in a loose curve, he was able to see the small building decorated with various flowers on its eaves. The brilliant flowers looked beautiful against the dull amber walls it shared with the other buildings. At a glance it appeared like a flower shop but the sign that was hung reservedly from its eaves was engraved with a sign that only shops that dealt with medicine were permitted to show. When he quietly peeked inside the shop through its large window, he found that bottled medicinal herbs and the sort were crowded side by side.

Asyut slowly pushed the door and grinding sound of the wooden door echoed in the small room. A woman who was seated in the corner of the store knitting raised her head at the sound.

"Welcome."

The moment he entered the store the unique smell of medicinal herbs reached his nose. Asyut unconsciously looked over the inside of the shop over confirming the shopkeeper.

"Are you looking for something?"

"...Erm."

How did he broach the topic? Asyut turned to the woman in the shop while hesitating.

"Oh my, a face I don't see often. A traveler?"

"Yes."

The woman, who remained seated in her chair, smiled sweetly at Asyut. She was a woman of medium build and probably a little over forty years old. Her loose wavy brown hair was bound behind her casually and she wore plain-colored clothes and a white apron.

“Please look around as you’d like. If there is anything you’re curious about, please ask.”

Asyut nodded and reached out to the items in the store as he was told. –Was that woman Yuna’s mother? If so then, according to the investigation documents Linus handed to him before his departure, her name should be Madela if he remembered correctly. Was the father out? Or was he on the second floor of the store?

Various thoughts ran through his head. Asyut didn’t even know what kind of item he was reaching out to right now.

“I recommend that in particular.”

The woman called out to Asyut in a calm tone.

“The medicinal herbs by your hands right now work well for fatigue. If you are traveling then surely you are tired? How about boiling this and drinking it when you return to the inn tonight?”

Asyut tried to respond with something but he couldn’t. Raising his head he stared at the woman again in silence.

“Is something the matter?”

The woman, who seemed to think Asyut’s actions were puzzling, tilted her head a little.

He had to achieve the goal he came here for. He had to be as natural as possible, so as not to alarm her.

Asyut swallowed.

“Um, pardon me but... are you Yuna’s mother?”

“Wha.”

In that instant he could tell that the blood had suddenly pulled from her face. It was like the unexpected name that had jumped out from Asyut’s mouth had stabbed her heart. –It was a reaction greater than he expected.

“I apologize for the abruptness. Actually, I am a friend of Yuna’s.”

Asyut continued talking slowly so as not to frighten her as much as possible.

“We were acquainted in the royal capital and, though it was for a short period, I am greatly indebted to her. I heard that Yuna seemed to have died in an accident and, unable to give up no matter what, I ended up intruding upon here.”

“.....”

She remained stiff, not uttering a single word.

“I understand I have caused you trouble for intruding suddenly without any message.”

“...A friend... of Yuna’s.”

She brought that topic up, as if ascertaining that line, and blinked repeatedly.

“And you came all this way?”

“I just couldn’t believe it until I spoke to her parents.”

“Is that... so...”

She placed the knitting set that was on her knees onto a table. And then, giving a deep sigh, she brushed her long bangs up with both hands like that.

“I’m sorry... I’m... shocked. It’s been a long time since I heard my daughter’s name from another person.”

She said that while heaving one more sigh.

“Indeed, as you’ve said, I am Yuna’s mother, Madela. Ever since that accident it’s been hard to live in the previous town and so my husband and I moved to this town recently.”

“Then the accident...”

“Exactly as you’ve heard. A year ago my daughter was hit by a carriage and passed away.”

–Passed away.

To be told that clearly from the mouth of the mother was a shock that was like being struck with lightning for Asyut. Somewhere in his mind he might have thought she'd strongly deny her daughter having died.

"And your name is?"

"...I am called Sieg."

Asyut gave an alias at once. It hurt his heart to lie to Yuna's mother but he could see it being suspicious if he gave his real name. The name of Asyut, the country's First Holy Knight, was too widely known.

"Sieg, is it. But how did my daughter know a person of the royal capital?"

A slight searching look came up in Madela's eyes. Although Asyut was flustered inwardly it was true that he didn't want to lie as much as possible. For that reason, he started speaking in a vague manner.

"I do not know if you are aware but Yuna was an old friend of the saint, Lady Celiastina. I myself am originally an acquaintance of Lady Celiastina's and, through her, I was acquainted with Yuna."

"Through Lady Celiastina?"

Madela's eyes widened once more.

"...It's true there was a little relationship with Yuna and the Lady Saint but..."

"I heard she was good friends with Lady Celiastina who spent her days at the orphanage."

"You know even that much."

After he nodded, Madela showed a delicate smile.

"That's a nostalgic story. Come to think of it, that child loved that orphanage... Aah, now that I think back on it, I did a great disservice on that child."

Right at that time.

The door to the store was opened again with a dull sound. A man with wide shoulders

and in his mid-forties entered the shop carrying a large hemp bag.

“Oh, dear, welcome home.”

“Yeah, I’m home.”

From Madela’s words Asyut could tell that man was her husband and Yuna’s father. When the man turned his eyes to Asyut the corners of his eyes crinkled slightly and he called out a “Welcome”. He seemed to think that Asyut was a normal customer. The man opened a door in the corner of the room like that and disappeared into the back of the hall.

“That was my husband Rendo just now. He had gone out to pick wild herbs but has returned for a break. I’m really sorry but my husband is still unused to talking about Yuna, more than me. I’d like to hear more stories since you’re here but could we do that at another opportunity?”

“...Yes, I’m truly and deeply sorry for suddenly intruding.”

He was curious about the continuation of Madela’s words but he couldn’t force her to talk when she asked him to come next time. He could do nothing but withdraw obediently here.

“I intend to stay in this town for a while still. And, as I would certainly like to ask about Yuna, may I impose on you in the near future?”

“Yes, of course. If you come before noon then my husband will not be here either. Next time, I’ll even put out some tea. Oh, that’s right, please take those medicinal herbs just now by all means. They really are effective.”

“Thank you very much. How much are they?”

“No, no, of course I cannot take your money. You are Yuna’s friend so this is a given.”

“But.”

In a manner that didn’t take no for an answer, the medicinal herbs that were wrapped in a paper bag were pushed into Asyut. When he said his thanks again, Madela turned a soft smile to him. Sent off by that smile, Asyut left the store while feeling a painful reluctance.

As he walked along the street Asyut gradually felt the energy slip out of his body.

–At long last he was able to meet Yuna’s parents.

It wasn’t a dream but a real event.

Was Yuna a girl that closely resembled her mother? Asyut called to mind the figure of Madela who had faced him just now. Yuna might also have that gentle smile reminiscent of sunlight filtering through trees.

“Oh my, you went to Rendo’s medicine store, right?”

A woman with a good physique, the one who told him about the medicine store in detail along the way, saw Asyut and called out to him. Behind her skirt a young girl, who hadn’t been there when he met this woman some time ago, showed her face slightly. When she met eyes with Asyut she hid behind her mother’s back as if in a hurry.

“That bag is one of the store’s.”

“Yes. Thank you for earlier.”

“Their medicine works the best if I do say so myself. They even hold their own against other medicine stores in other towns. Why not do some big spending?”

“You’re right. I’ll have to stop by again.”

They made some easy conversation and parted again. It was another fresh experience for Asyut to talk to others without important business.

Going around aimlessly, Asyut walked through a weaving alley partly taking a stroll. Although it was a back alley there was absolutely no air of danger like that of the royal capital. Instead it had an atmosphere of being a children’s playground and he heard young excited voices here and there.

Eventually he came out onto a comparatively large street. When he raised his head slightly the tall tower of the church approached before his very eyes. No matter how narrow the road was it seemed a person was able to go to the church in the center of the town like this.

Since he arrived here in the end maybe he'd show himself at the church again. He might be able to talk to the old priest once more and so Asyut placed his hand on the door of the church.

When he entered he could not see the figure of the priest from yesterday. Instead, there was a single preceding visitor who sat in a chair with their back facing him. From the glossy long hair he could only tell that it was a woman.

The woman, who was facing the rising altar at the front, suddenly turned around. Her large eyes were striking and she was a woman of the same age as Asyut. Her face, as soon as she noticed Asyut's appearance, scowled clearly. Asyut stopped moving, taken aback by that reaction. He had been treated coldly many times by the residents of this town in these two days, but it was truly the first time such an obvious rebuff was directed at him.

Maybe it was because he interrupted her when she was offering up prayers alone. He thought that he should leave, but he changed his mind thinking it would be a rude action to turn on his heel and leave the moment he saw her face. After hesitating a little bit Asyut nodded to her and then walked towards the center along the wall of the church.

He looked to the back passage where the priest appeared yesterday but there was no sign of a person at all.

"If you're looking for the priest, he's gone out."

The woman murmured this quietly. It was a small voice but it resounded well inside the church. When he turned around, her eyes caught Asyut firmly.

"You came here yesterday too, didn't you. Do you have business with him?"

"...You are?"

"I am Hariet. The priest here, Maurice's daughter. Well, what's your business?"

"No, I didn't come here with any business in particular."

"Is that so. I don't think a person like you would drop in without any business though."

Asyut was troubled on what words to respond with and looked at Hariet with his mouth closed. However, the silence that descended between them was too heavy and hard to bear. In the end, Asyut resigned himself and opened his mouth again.

“I heard this is a town where travelers don’t come much.”

“That’s not what I mean. Aren’t you a person from the royal capital?”

“...Why do you say that?”

She pierced the core straight to the point, so much that he could not gloss it over. He was struck with the impulse that he had to confess everything when he was seized by those eyes, where a deep color dwelled.

“I knew somehow. I took the opportunity to return to this town because my dad passed sixty years old, but I personally lived in the royal capital until a few years ago. You completely have the air of a person from the royal capital.”

“...Certainly, by nature I am a person of the royal capital.”

“I knew it.”

A sharp light glimmered in Hariet’s eyes.

“And why exactly did a royal capital’s person come to this remote town, I wonder.”

“Not anything in particular... It’s simply in the middle of my journey.”

“Stop lying. And that polite talk too. At any rate, you’re probably an official with status.”

“...Then, on the other hand, I’d like to ask why you have to be so prejudiced just because I am a person of the royal capital. I don’t recall ever harming anyone.”

“Self-defense is necessary because it’s late after harm has been done. Yesterday, my dad seemed to have welcomed you carefreely but that can’t happen in the future. If you want to pray at a church tomorrow too then go to another town.”

This was exactly what being unapproachable was.

“–Did something happen to this town before related to the royal capital?”

Harriet shook her head.

“It’s none of your business.”

Harriet must not have planned to speak any more as she quietly stood up and, turning her back to Asyut, she walked to the back of the church. It was such an unilateral and unreasonable attitude. Asyut tried to say something to that back but in the end couldn’t. It was like her frank rejection had stolen his words.

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The day came to an end.

When the sun withdrew beyond the horizon, leaving a long trail, the lively laughter of the town’s men began to echo in the inn’s bar as though the leading role changed.

It seemed like Asyut continued to be the only customer of the inn. As a result, the attention in the bar also naturally concentrated on Asyut. Taking a seat, from what he could see of the place, the rough majority of the customers didn’t seem to change from those people of yesterday. Most of the men bore in mind the flow of yesterday’s conversation and threw a barrage of questions at Asyut.

“Mister, did you meet with your girl today?”

“No.”

Someone slapped Asyut’s back strongly when he gave a small shake of his head.

“Confess already, who is it?”

“I don’t wanna know yet. It’ll be boring if we know the specifics.”

“Hey, from the start wasn’t it a joke that you came to see a girl? If a good looking guy like you came, wouldn’t any girl start breathing heavily and come crashing in.”

“Right. For example, even married women or the lord’s daughter.”

“Ah, that’s it! Isn’t the lord’s daughter the right answer?”

Maybe they were hungering greatly for daily amusement but the men rapidly emptied

their beer mugs with just the side dish topic of which daughter the traveler's lover was.

"If there's anything I can do, I'll always help out. If it's really the lord's daughter though I might not be much use."

"Wait, wait, thinking about this, the lord's daughter doesn't seem to be ten years old yet."

"There must be a secret child and that daughter's a blooming beauty."

"I see, normally she's hiding her status and living poorly somewhere in this town, huh."

"What a sad girl..."

Asyut showed a wry smile at the men looking down with solemn expressions. There the owner's wife made a rude entrance and grabbed her husband, who had the same solemn look, by the collar and hauled him up.

"Dear, you haven't been cooking at all! There's tons of orders so hurry up and return to the kitchen!"

"W-What, just a little while is fine!"

"No it's not!"

Giving him a strict scolding, she disappeared into the kitchen dragging her husband like that. The people who watched that laughed, shaking their heads, and winked at Asyut.

"That wife is pretty beautiful too, right? But women are just like that. No matter how fragile and ladylike they look, they've got massive nerves and a spine."

"...That's true. I feel that too."

"Oh! So, mister, you're the type who's already whipped?"

Me too, me too, the men raised both their hands with glee. The owner of the inn peeked his face out from the kitchen at that noise and the corners of his eyebrows sunk down in envy.

In the end, this evening too ended without him hearing any useful information.

However Asyut was more concerned about Hariet's attitude, whom he met at the church. Exactly like an unseen blade thrusting at Asyut, that girl bared a hostility towards him. Why did she show such a severe attitude just because he was a person from the royal capital?

(Isn't it because she knows about the "sleeping girl"?)

Thinking in that way, he was able to understand her stubborn attitude. If she thought he was a messenger of the royal palace who heard the rumors and came to do harm to Yuna and her parents and was wary of that.

Asyut finished early and went to his room, sitting on the hard bed.

The light of the lamp placed in the room wasn't too reliable. However, there was moonlight tonight.

(...What's happening in the royal palace at this time.)

The problem he tried not to think about these two days abruptly appeared in Asyut's mind. He rushed out, having pushed responsibility onto the king, and so Asyut wondered how he perceived these events.

If he seriously found Asyut's actions disagreeable then soldiers should have been released already and were heading here to arrest Asyut. Of course, it was impossible that the king did not know of Yuna's location. -From the royal capital to the town of Svet was a day and a half's ride one way. Right now, in this moment, it wouldn't be strange for the king's private soldiers to appear.

(If soldiers were sent after me then everyone in the royal palace must be disappointed in me.)

People would not desire a First Holy Knight who committed a crime to the extent of being pursued by the country.

Naturally, if that were the case then he understood he brought it upon himself. He didn't intend to throw away his status but it was an undeniable fact that he tossed his

obligations to choose Yuna and was now here in Svet like this. Asyut himself was keenly aware that he had no excuse.

He had run to this point as the First Holy Knight wishing to be an existence that supported the people–.

(What should I do if I've lost everyone's trust.)

Should Asyut live like how he was right now, as a single person with no title and who abandoned his status and position? If he succeeded in waking Yuna he'd tell her his feelings once more and, if she were to accept him, they could live quietly together.

That wasn't bad, he thought.

It shouldn't be bad.

But–.

At that moment, the sound of something running up the stairs leapt into Asyut's ears.

Those footsteps, which were unreserved, crossed the hall noisily and came closer to him. By some chance, if it was what he thought, Asyut stood ready as the door to his room was knocked on roughly.

“Heeyy, mister, you're there, right? Let's drink together.”

“Is he asleep already?”

The door was opened without waiting for an answer. There stood two young men with wide grins and carrying beer mugs in both arms.

“Ah, so you're still awake.”

It was the two carpenters that he met in the town during the day. Asyut secretly released the tension in his shoulders.

“Sorry, I was thinking of resting now tonight.”

He said that as a mild declination but the two didn't show any sign of pulling back at all.

"I know. It's full of noisy people down there so you're tired, huh. We'll drink calmly like adults."

"You intend to drink here?"

"We've got the boss' acknowledgement so it's OK."

"There's not enough chairs. No one's staying in the next room, right? I'm gonna bring one from there."

During the time Asyut was astounded the two went ahead with drinking preparations on their own. It was an assertiveness that made one wonder what happened to them having gone away from Asyut awkwardly in the day. Without being able to refuse, by the time he noticed, the three men sat down surrounding the small table.

"Right then, once again, cheers."

Come to think of it, this was also an experience he'd never had until now. As Asyut thought about that he found himself raising the glass that was poured to the brim with alcohol in resignation.

"Hey, I asked today at noon whether you're really chasing someone, right?"

The short-haired oval-faced young man said this in a light manner.

"Could it be the medicine store Rendo's daughter?"

"...You know about that?"

Asyut acknowledged that honestly.

"It's a small town so rumors are fast."

But, the unruly-haired man continued.

"Yuna's already dead. Did you come here not knowing that?"

“No, I heard about that.”

“I see. Then it must have been even more painful.”

Painful, that might be the case. But right now the frustration of being unable to get her back won over the sorrow of loss.

“If she was still alive, did you plan on proposing?”

“.....”

“Woah, you’re falling silent there?”

“...Who knows. There are various problems and, without having decided that far, I’ve come to today.”

“What the heck. Even though you chased her this far?”

The oval-faced man turned criticizing eyes to him.

“In any case, I wanted to see a glimpse of her. I couldn’t think about anything more than that.”

“Well then, isn’t that your answer already.”

The unruly-haired young man pressed on in an easy tone.

“You came to this countryside with just feelings of only wanting to see her, so once you catch a glimpse of her I don’t think you’ll be able to let her go meekly.”

“–Is that so.”

“That’s so! Once you see her, you definitely won’t be able to let her go!”

The oval-faced man also nodded vigorously with his partner. But that energy was also just for an instant and they immediately looked at each other and became quiet.

“But, well, Yuna’s already dead. Sorry.”

“...Really?”

Asyut turned imploring eyes to the two people.

“Do I have to believe that?”

“What.”

“I don’t want to believe that she died. I want to believe in a different possibility.”

The men closed their mouths and stared at Asyut for a while. The bustle of the bar which could be overheard suddenly felt far away.

“...I’m sorry but we can’t say anything.”

After a while of silence the oval-faced man muttered that.

“But why don’t you go to Rendo without giving up?”

“Hey, you.”

The unruly-haired man raised his voice as if in a rush to hold him back. But his partner didn’t seem to care about that.

“See, I’ve noticed recently that anything goes pretty much in this world. Like how we’ve accepted thinking these all-too-common days we spend in this small town like this might continue without any change for our entire lives. But things can happen unexpectedly. You know?”

“I don’t get it at all. What are you talking about. You’re super drunk.”

“Haha, maybe. I’m saying that miracles tumble around a lot everywhere.”

His words that were said in a singsong way soaked deeply into Asyut’s heart.

“That’s why, mister, if you’ve come this far then you don’t have to give up easily.”

“...Miracles tumble around a lot, huh.”

When Asyut murmured this with a serious look, the unruly-haired man shook his hands in a panic.

“No, don’t pay any serious attention to what this guy’s said. He’s just a drunkard.”

“Yeah, I know. But thanks.”

“Alright, now that the talk’s done let’s drink to the end tonight!”

“It’s not settled at all!”

As he watched the two joking with each other a smile naturally welled up on Asyut. And then they toasted again. The light sound of the glasses striking each other echoed in the room.

Thinking on it, even meeting the two of them like this might be one of those small miracles.

(If I meet her I won’t be able to let her go, huh.)

Asyut downed his beer to the best of his ability. The words of the young men surprisingly fell into his heart with a thud. What simple and clear words they were.

Asyut’s gaze dropped to his emptied glass.

Chapter Seven

The next morning Asyut once again proceeded to the medicine store that Yuna's parents ran.

He may be disliked for appearing right on the heels of yesterday; however, even then he did not care, and Asyut was half-defiant. The interaction at the church with Hariet and last night's small drinking party pushed Asyut's back. Hope had not been exhausted yet. A miracle was surely within reach.

He went up a long slope.

Having come to this town, only a few days had passed, and yet he was able to find many familiar faces amongst passers-by who came and went past him. There was the old man who sat under the same building yesterday, the children running around in the back alley, and the housewives chatting beside the well... Indeed, like this "acquaintances" would increase in a flash. And like the young men, who he drank together with yesterday, said, it made sense how any rumors were spread immediately.

Before long he arrived at the medicine store and through the window there was Madela's figure.

Here too, the same as yesterday, she was sitting on the cashier's side and apparently seemed to be deep in talk with a preceding visitor.

When he quietly opened the door and entered inside Madela showed a soft smile along with a "Welcome" like she did on the first day. The woman who she was talking to turned around as a result of that voice and was- surprisingly the priest's daughter, Hariet.

Hariet, upon recognizing Asyut's appearance, furrowed her brows without hesitation like she did on the first day.

"You..."

“Oh, Sieg, you came again.”

Hariet sent a sharp gaze without a moment's delay to Madela who greeted Asyut in a relaxed manner.

“Hold on, sister-in-law. You know about this person?”

“Hm? Yes, he's the traveler who stopped by here yesterday.”

“Stopped by here, you say.”

Once again Hariet glared over at him.

As he received her warm reception Asyut discovered the reason for her thorny attitude towards him alone and nodded inwardly with comprehension.

Hariet called Madela her sister-in-law. In other words, she was a relative of Yuna's. And that's why she was guarded – more than needed – against Asyut, a visitor from the city– from the royal capital.

But what did that really mean?

(As I thought, Yuna didn't just die.)

Gathering these small fragments little by little, Asyut's hope changed into conviction.

“For you to have already buttered up to my sister. You're outrageous.”

“Hariet, what are you saying. He is Yuna's friend and came all this way from the royal capital for Yuna.”

Madela's chiding voice did not reach Hariet.

“Sister, you can't believe that bullshit. There's no way he can be her friend. You can tell just by looking at him. He's definitely a person with social status, even in the royal capital. So, how did this person get to know Yuna?”

“Don't assume things like that, Hariet... I'm really sorry about this, Sieg.”

Asyut shook his head a little at Madela who was trying to mediate the situation with a

troubled look.

“No, since I am the one who surprised you with my sudden visit... Miss Hariet is Yuna’s...”

“I’m Yuna’s aunt. Yuna’s dad, Rendo, is my older brother.”

If that was the case then that meant the priest of that church, Maurice, was Yuna’s grandfather. So that was why Yuna’s parents relied on this church and moved here. It wasn’t them moving to a rural town at random.

“Now, I’ve made my identity clear. This time I’ll have you talk in detail about your “true” relationship with Yuna.”

“I said stop it, Hariet.”

Placing her hand on the angry Hariet’s shoulder, Madela made the woman, who had risen from her seat, sit down again.

“I would also like to ask Sieg all about Yuna. But, since it’s a connection to Yuna that has been made with effort, doesn’t everyone wish to talk about it comfortably?”

When Madela smiled softly it seemed that even Hariet was unable to show a stubborn attitude any more than that. She pouted her lips, as if having become sulky, but didn’t say anything more.

“Wait one moment.”

Saying that, Madela withdrew into the back room and then returned immediately with three cups of tea. She handed each of them to Asyut and Hariet and placed her own on top of the cashier’s shelf. And then, as soon as she disappeared once more into the back, she pulled out a chair this time and offered it to Asyut.

“Please sit down as well. I apologize for it being in the shop though.”

“But what if other people come to shop.”

“It’s fine. I normally sit down and talk with customers like this.”

Urged by Madela who didn’t seem concerned about that, Asyut sat down as he was

told. And when he tasted the tea he was given, in order to dodge the dangerous glare sent over from Hariet who was beside him, the faint sweetness of the leaves spread in his mouth and the warmth gradually seeped into his body.

“Now, where did we talk to yesterday. You told me you became acquainted with Yuna through Lady Celiastina, right?”

Madela tilted her head while drinking her own tea. Meanwhile, Hariet startled and her eyes widened.

“Yes. And that Yuna and Lady Celiastina were friends from the time of the orphanage.”

“Aah, that’s right.”

“You said that you had done a disservice to Yuna during that time of the orphanage. What was it?”

“Oh, so we even talked about that. No, actually, it was only for a short period of time where I took Yuna to the orphanage. Even though she was always looking forward to going to play at the orphanage, it seemed I made her quite sad when she was unable to see her friends because of my circumstances.”

“This may sound like I am prying but what circumstances were those? Ah, you see, Yuna personally explained that she wasn’t able to go to the orphanage because her parents became busy.”

“Being busy was, in truth, an excuse. In reality, I was afraid.”

“Afraid?”

Madela lowered her eyes and drank her tea again.

“I wonder if you’ve heard... about the name of a girl called Cella who was living in the orphanage at the time.”

“Yes, I know of it. It is the real name of the present Lady Celiastina.”

“You really know a lot... Now that I think about it, I was rather silly. But, at that time, I believed in it firmly.”

“What exactly?”

“That in those days, at the orphanage, there were people who died now and then.”

“.....”

“At the time, I heard by chance strange rumors. That the people who died were only those deeply involved with Cella. Of course, at first, I thought it was people starting bad rumors and didn’t think too deeply on it. But, later, when a staff members who cared particularly for Cella met an accident and died I quickly became frightened.”

Maybe she was thinking back to that time but Madela’s complexion wasn’t very good.

“I suddenly became concerned, remembering that my daughter Yuna was good friends with Cella. Rather, at that time, Cella didn’t have many friends and seemed to play only with Yuna. When I started to think that it might be Yuna’s turn next I wasn’t able to contain myself.”

“So, you kept a distance from the orphanage?”

“That’s right. I made reasons about one thing or another and tried not to take Yuna to the orphanage. Yuna had pleaded while crying that she had a friend she’d like to see, but I didn’t permit that. I even forbade the topic from being brought up and I thought that Yuna had also eventually forgotten about the orphanage, but perhaps she’s always thought about deep in her mind... That you and Yuna were acquainted through Lady Celiastina means that Yuna was reunited with Lady Celiastina in the royal capital, right?”

Asyut lowered his eyes. He couldn’t find the words to reply with.

However, in any case, he had no choice but to say that Madela’s decision was correct. If Yuna had passed the time as good friends with Cella like that, there was no mistake that sooner or later Yuna would have died due to Cella’s distorted ability.

“I’m sorry for talking to you about such a thing. Honestly, I thought I would talk to Yuna properly one day and apologize. But I can’t even do that...”

Madela averted her gaze from Asyut and looked off into the distance somewhere. Hariet also lowered her eyes to her hands with a grave look. He wondered what kind of feelings stretched out after those words that trailed off...

“Thank you very much for informing me about various things. Ever since I heard that story from Yuna and Lady Celiastina I’ve always been curious, so one load has been taken off my mind.”

“Really?”

Her feeble smile was painful to look at. It was the expression of a mother who was looking back on the memories of her deceased daughter.

Why was she looking so sad? Wasn’t Yuna supposed to be alive? It was as if Madela would never see her again–.

Abruptly being unable to endure that Asyut opened his mouth, carried along with that momentum.

“Madela, could I please meet with Yuna?”

“Huh?”

“If there’s a grave then I would like to offer flowers. Or–“

If she wasn’t dead yet then. Asyut managed to stifle the words that seemed about to come out and, instead, caught his breath.

“Thank you. But due to circumstances I can’t show you to the grave. If you wish to remember Yuna then... ah, I know, please offer prayerse at the church in this town. If you do then I’m sure your prayers will reach Yuna as well.”

No, that wouldn’t reach her. Neither these feelings, nor this voice, not one thing.

“Can you tell me about those circumstances?”

“I’m sorry. It’s all a little complicated.”

“I am aware that it isn’t a topic an outsider who suddenly intruded should pry into, but I wish to know about Yuna by any means. I was truly saved a lot by her. It is not an exaggeration to say that my life has been saved by Yuna. And I simply cannot return home without knowing Yuna’s fate.”

“Hey, you, my sister said it was impossible.”

Harriet leaned forward as if to protect Madela.

“.....”

Madela’s gaze dropped and she behaved as if she were indecisive over how to answer. But.

“–In the end, this is our family’s problem.”

At last she did not give in. It was as if she were telling herself that, saying it slowly one word at a time.

Aah, at this rate it would be all over.

The truth about Yuna’s death would be buried forever by her family.

That was the only thing he wouldn’t allow.

“–Is Yuna truly dead?”

In the end Asyut spoke the words that struck at the core.

†

He no longer wanted to act any more in a way that distanced Yuna from “life” with ambiguous words.

He wanted them to say that Yuna was alive.

“What are you talking about?”

Harriet muttered this in a stiff voice.

“...No, it doesn’t matter even if you don’t explain. This is more than enough. Please go home right now.”

“Wait, Hariet.”

“Yuna’s death is a problem that hasn’t even been assimilated yet among us, her family. I can’t bear it being rudely disturbed by an outsider.”

“Hariet, he came all this way from far away.”

“Sister, you’re too soft-hearted.”

Madela tried to argue even more but Hariet’s anger couldn’t be calmed down.

“Please wait. Won’t you please listen to what I have to say?”

Asyut opened his mouth calmly trying, as much as possible, not to imbue his words with emotion.

“Hariet, as you’ve said, I would like to properly explain who I am. Because many things truly happened with me and Yuna.”

Asyut clenched both of his hands.

It would not be easy to have them believe the events of this past year. Still, he had to hold nothing back. He had to tell them his purpose, in all sincerity with no false feelings. And then he had to get them to accept it–.

However, Asyut was unable to continue his words any further.

Because the appearance of sudden visitors in the shop broke the tense air.

“Apologies but we will be interrupting your conversation, madam and company.”

In contrast to their words, several men and women of the same age as Madela passed through the store’s doors with absolutely no reservation– and there was also a figure Asyut had seen once, Madela’s husband Rendo.

Madela and Hariet widened their eyes and stood at the sudden visitors. Rendo had a haggard expression and his head was bowed deeply. Just from that appearance it was clear that the visitors did not bring any good news.

“What seems to be the matter with everyone? Is there something my husband has done...”

Madela took a single step towards them and they sent a cold gaze towards her. Then, when they glanced over to confirm Asyut’s figure, their eyebrows openly knitted.

“So, the traveler is here as well. It was exactly as we worried.”

Among them, the most senior looking man said this provokingly.

“Madela, we have already told your husband but we will tell you once again. We are already at our limits living together with you and yours.”

“What was that?”

Madela’s bewilderment showed that she didn’t understand what they were getting at.

“We are talking about how we cannot protect you any longer in this village. In the first place, we were opposed to accepting a suspicious girl to begin with. We have our way of life and it is intolerable to have the country’s eyes on us by being burdened with danger that need not be beared.”

The man’s talk wasn’t very relevant to Asyut but it seemed to have been conveyed more than enough to Madela. And not only Madela. Hariet sunk into silence, standing beside Madela, with a pale expression as well.

“And, as I had feared, an investigation has come like this from the outside at last.”

Asyut received their gazes and understood that this matter was connected to him. And then– he comprehended everything this man had said. It was Yuna. The sleeping girl and her parents had been accepted together by this village. They knew about her and were adverse to that fact. Asyut could only think this.

“Mister, who exactly do you belong to? Are you truly just traveling? Or have you not come to this town of Svet to investigate something?”

“Why’d you drop in all of a s-sudden! This person is an outsider. Please don’t start that topic in front of an unrelated person!”

Before Asyut could respond with an answer Hariet raised an irritated voice.

“Hmph, I wonder if he is truly unrelated. If it is in accordance with our concerns then there will be serious consequences. It will not be something we can endure, Hariet. And it will be a problem if we are called accomplices, including the town, to the crime of sheltering a girl who blasphemes the power of the saint. Because we are merely victims who have had this heavy burden forced unilaterally upon us.”

“What did you say!”

Hariet’s voice was rough with a force where, right at this moment, she could spring at them. For an instant, the man looked frightened but then he cleared his throat once and continued further.

“In any case, beyond this, your daughter–“

“Wait.”

There Madela’s husband, Rendo, broke in.

“Please, I beg you, don’t say anything more.”

“D-Dear...”

“Madel, who is that man. What exactly were you talking about?”

Rendo looked at Asyut with downcast eyes.

“He is...”

Madel’s words didn’t continue. It was natural because Asyut had not explained about himself yet. That backfired in this place.

“...He’s just a guest. There’s no connection.”

Hariet declared this in a low voice.

“We can’t let an unrelated person go along with this complicated talk any more. Anyway, let’s ask him to go home.”

Asyut bit his lip. He could see that the situation would become unnecessarily complicated if he clung on here. And if that were to get in the way of Yuna’s family then

he could only obediently withdraw now.

However, it was the residents of the town that didn't allow that.

"Harriet, what are you saying. It would be quicker if we had this person listen to this as well. We, and the other residents, should make it clear here that we are unrelated to the matter of Rendo's daughter."

"No, because this person is unrelated to that matter. This person said so himself."

"In the first place, is a disguised investigator not such a thing?"

"But he's not one. He's only a traveler and just a customer."

"And yet, looking in from the outside, it seemed like you were having a very serious conversation."

"That's..."

"Trying to lie means that we hit the nail on the head, no?"

Once again an explosive air slowly but steadily spread.

"-Everyone."

When Asyut raised his voice, the people who were glaring at each other turned their heads to him as if suddenly surprised. Asyut looked at each and every one of their expressions.

The self-assured residents, the exhausted Rendo, Madela who was determinedly holding her tongue, and Harriet whose cheeks were tinged with red due to anger.

"Please allow me to say only this. I am certainly a person from the royal capital and I am not unrelated to Yuna's matter. However, I did not come for the reasons you are concerned about. I came to this town to confirm Yuna's state and with feelings of wanting to save her, if possible. But I would like to tell the detailed circumstances to Yuna's family later."

He turned his gaze to Rendo, Madela, and Harriet and deliberately stressed this.

“I absolutely won’t hurt Yuna.”

And, in order to have them believe that, he had to withdraw now.

“–I will pay my respects again at a later time.”

Lowering his head slightly, Asyut left the store.

†

Asyut returned to the inn and threw himself onto the hard bed like that.

“Welcome back. If it would please you, would you like some tea brewed?”

The voice of the owner’s wife came from beyond the thin wooden door.

She must have been anxious, noticing that Asyut was strange when they passed each other in the hall just now.

“No, I am fine. Thank you very much.”

Just saying his thanks through the door, Asyut closed his eyes.

(I was foolish.)

Suddenly, the feeling of regret fell onto his body.

His own thoughtless actions had caused that disturbance not long ago.

Without revealing his status or purpose he had loitered around to sound out the town for several days. In a town where travelers normally didn’t come, it must have attracted a lot of notice. Like the residents that had pushed into Rendo and Madela’s store, there might be many others who had imagined bad things.

(If I had properly confirmed the circumstances to Yuna’s parents from the beginning...)

Of course, he didn’t think they would have easily accepted the situation. In either case, getting them to approve would not have been easy. However, if he had disclosed everything to them, putting aside whether they believed it or not, they should have

had other actions too. Asyut's methods of removing obstacles in the way of his objective had, in the end, done nothing but treat Yuna's parents as outsiders and gone around planting a seed of misgivings into the surrounding people.

What exactly should he do now?

This wasn't the time to be crushed by regrets. Whether his feelings of remorse became stone weights that tangled his feet, now was the moment where he had to move forward.

(There's no time. For me, and for them.)

Asyut turned to look up on the bed and, covering his face with both hands, sighed heavily.

(I'll go to meet them once again tomorrow morning. And there, this time, I'll explain everything.)

Asyut had decided on that.

But—.

In the end even that resolve was not fulfilled.

Because he wasn't able to approach the next morning without incident.

That evening the married couple, Rendo and Madela, came to the inn to visit Asyut.

Borrowing the small yard that spread out behind the inn, the three faced each other once again. Of course, it wasn't an atmosphere where one could greet each other light-heartedly and the light that leaked out of the bar on the first floor illuminated the stiff expressions of the married couple unreservedly. That light was surely shining on Asyut's hard expression in the same way.

"I apologize sincerely for visiting you at night."

Rendo broke the ice with an exhausted voice.

“I heard about you from my wife and Harriet. With the situation being as it is, I couldn’t put this off.”

“...Yes.”

Asyut nodded with brief words.

Rendo and Madela looked at each other slightly. When Madela nodded firmly, pulling her chin in, Rendo opened his mouth again at that sign.

“Sieg, it seems that you were acquainted with our Yuna through Lady Celiastina. I’m surprised by the fact itself that she had a connection to Lady Celiastina recently... But, anyway, let’s put aside that topic for now. So, you heard that Yuna died and came to this Svet in order to confirm that.”

“Correct. However, I personally believe that Yuna is still alive even now.”

Rendo and Madela stared into Asyut’s eyes.

“Yuna is alive. Isn’t that so?”

Asyut strengthened his tone and asked that. It was a tone that was almost pleading.

There was a small pause.

And then it was Madela who broke the silence.

“...Yes, that’s right. Yuna is alive.”

“Madela.”

Rendo rebuked his wife beside him with a strict voice but she did not falter as she didn’t just before noon.

“I believe in Sieg. Either way, it’s become like this, and we can’t hide it any longer.”

Isn’t that right, Madela seemed to say as she looked up directly at her husband. And then she faced Asyut firmly again.

“That Yuna was in an accident about a year ago is true. After that she’s continued to

sleep without ever waking up even to this day in this town's church where Rendo's father serves as the priest."

"In the church?"

He hadn't thought that far.

Then that church he visited for the first time on the first day– Yuna had been there?

"There's no sign of her waking at all?"

"Yes, none. She's really done nothing but continued to sleep. Of course, she hasn't eaten or even drank water. But she hasn't become thinner and she's also breathing steadily. I don't know how to understand this situation. Is it God's will..."

"Anyway, we can only continue to wait for the day Yuna wakes up."

Rendo also continued his words as if resigned.

"At the same time we had to hide Yuna's existence at all costs, because we ourselves knew best that it wasn't natural for her to continue sleeping for a year. We thought that if her existence entered the king's ears then danger would undoubtedly approach Yuna."

"Because only the saint alone can cause a miracle in this world?"

"Other "miracles" are not recognized as miracles. I thought that they would be removed by the country as not having happened from the start."

"And so we disclosed the circumstances only to some residents of this town and decided to hide Yuna behind closed doors in this entire town."

So, among some of those residents were those men who showed an opposition at last. There was no doubt that for the married couple, Rendo and Madela, who thought to receive cooperation, they had endured a lot of the others' objections.

"We don't have any hopes of waking Yuna up. We can only wait for the next miracle to happen. But even that should be difficult like this. There is also a limit to living in fear of the royal capital learning about Yuna's existence. The complaints of the people in the town will only become bigger from here."

Madela hung her head and murmured this. What extent were the feelings of a mother whose daughter was treated unkindly?

“Actually, this matter has already passed to the royal palace, right?”

Rendo focused on Asyut once again. That gaze was clearly asking who he was.

“...The story that Yuna has continued to sleep for a year did not reach the royal capital through rumors and it was not by someone prosecuting her with ill will. I was told this as a fact that Lady Celiastina felt.”

“Lady Celiastina?”

Asyut nodded.

“Lady Celiastina knows all about Yuna being hit by a carriage and sleeping for a year afterwards. Because all these events were caused by Lady Celiastina and Yuna, and the relationship between the two.”

“W-What do you mean?”

Madela clasped both hands against her chest.

“As you are aware, the two were good childhood friends. However, they only spent a small period of time together and after that the two grew up separately. Still, to Lady Celiastina, those young days became an irreplaceable support to her heart. That is why, on the day she felt the limits of her life in the royal palace, her ability summoned Yuna who was hit by the carriage.”

“Summoned...?”

The start of everything was a small friendship from a long, long time ago.

It was so small that it hadn’t been kept in mind by anyone.

“Yuna’s soul was not called to the heavens and in this past year she has been together with us in the royal palace. I’ve been beside Yuna during this entire year.”

He heard the sound of Madela and Rendo’s breath catching.

It was like time stopped and there was no one who moved.

“My real name is not Sieg. I am–“

At that moment.

The faint wind blew through stronger.

And clouds began to cover the clear starry sky.

At first no one noticed that the liveliness of the bar suddenly changed to a different one.

The cheerful claps and laughter turned to a swelling noise. It was evident that the air in the area changed greatly, to the point where it was conveyed clearly to even Asyut and the others in the yard.

“...Did something happen in the bar?”

Rendo muttered this with unfocused eyes.

Asyut felt a slight clamor inside his heart.

Leaving the two in that spot, he went around to the front of the inn quickly. When he did, at the entrance of the inn that was wide open, a long-haired woman who was standing still there turned around. In that instant, he met eyes with her.

“–YOU'RE THE WORST!”

As she turned around she grabbed his collar without mercy. Asyut couldn't read the situation. However, it was there he finally realized the woman was someone he knew.

It was Hariet.

The bar fell silent as if splashed with water at the sudden intruder and the abrupt action.

“I won't forgive you. I absolutely won't forgive you!”

Hariet was completely enraged. She tried to punch Asyut like that but was pushed back by the men who came back to themselves at that point. But still, she didn't stop piercing Asyut with eyes covered in rage.

"Hariet, what's going on!"

The married couple, Rendo and Madela, who came around late to the front, joined the men in a panic and tried to restrain her.

"What happened?"

Asyut managed to ask just that somehow. But, even as he asked, there was an extremely bad premonition that spread slowly through his chest.

"How dare you have such an unconcerned face! You and those priests of the royal palace...! Because of you, that girl, Yuna is-!!"

Her words were a little bit unclear due to her agitation but it was more than enough for Asyut to comprehend the contents.

"It can't be."

He felt blood draining from his entire body.

Asyut raised his head and looked up at the church tower that rose in the dark night.

-Yuna was in danger.

Chapter Eight

“That’s enough!”

A sharp voice leapt abruptly into his ears.

Aeneas’ shoulders jerked and he came back to himself half in a daze.

When he realized it, he was standing stock-still in that spot with a sword gripped in his right hand.

The muscles in his limbs were horribly stiff and an unpleasant feeling of wasted effort dominated his entire body. At the end of his line of sight, which finally focused, the colleague that he had just been crossing blades with was looking up at him in fear on his bottom. Before long he raised a hand to show his intent to surrender.

–Aah, he was in the middle of training using real swords.

Somewhere in his vacant mind he grasped the situation.

“Sorry.”

Aeneas sheathed his sword and extended his right hand to the colleague who still hadn’t stood up. The colleague showed some hesitation to take that hand but in the end he borrowed Aeneas’ help and stood up.

“You two, take a break.”

Vansaider, the knight commander who was watching the training, said that in a voice without emotion. But, immediately after, he sent a glance in Aeneas’ direction.

“No, actually, you’re finished with today’s practice now.”

And words were given as if Aeneas’ mind was seen through.

Aeneas nodded obediently even as he hung his head. Even he understood that the practice just now was too horrible. The inside of his head was completely empty and

he was as good as just swinging his sword to clear the buildup of his emotions. If the knight commander hadn't called out to him like that then he might have brought a serious injury to his opponent. Even if he continued to participate in the practice in this state there was no doubt he'd cause trouble for his comrades.

"I apologize deeply and I will return to my official duties."

"Do that in moderation as well. What you need now is rest."

"...Yes, ser."

For even Vansaider, called the demon commander in shadowed whispers, to give him words of consideration. A miserable feeling spread through Aeneas' chest.

He did it again.

Aeneas' expression twisted, as if making a sour face.

Recently, in one way or another, he was making many mistakes. And he was well aware of the reason. But there was nothing that could be done. He didn't know what he should do.

(I feel somewhat tired.)

It wasn't only the training this time. It was everything surrounding him.

He wanted to stop thinking, he wanted to stop worrying, he wanted to abandon everything and do nothing but sleep. And then, like that, he didn't want to wake up anymore. If there was only an unclear reality with an unseen truth that awaited him when he woke then—.

(No, I really am extremely tired.)

Shaking his head, he encouraged himself.

Even while feeling a hopelessness blocking his heart every day, he made an effort not to give in to despair. He performed his duties properly every day, participated in the scheduled training, and he made sure to take three meals even if he didn't have an appetite. If those daily habits were to be lost, even just a little, he was afraid he'd lapse into degradation as if he were rolling down a hill. That's why he stubbornly tried to

protect his “everyday” and occasionally pretended to encourage himself. If his surroundings were asked they would say his state was already not normal, but he couldn’t deny that either. In the training just now he was certainly abnormal.

Ever since Celiastina disappeared from the royal palace, Aeneas was terribly unstable.

The last time he saw her she was confronting the anti-saint faction at the main gates and appealing earnestly for every one to lower their blades. Then she collapsed like that, continued to sleep for several days in her own room, and when she woke up she was now taken to the Priest Tower.

And, above all, that Celiastina was an “imposter”–.

For a year ago too. The woman who he faced, exchanged words with, and conveyed his feelings to was a completely different being.

Of course, there was no way he could believe such a story at first. He wanted her personally to acknowledge it as an outrageous fable. That’s why Aeneas, after Celiastina was confined in the Priest Tower, took as much action as possible to talk with her. He submitted a written argument to release her and also went to the Priest Tower to have direct talks. He even requested at least a glimpse of Celiastina to confirm her state, but all of Aeneas’ hopes were brought down point-blank. Still, he did not give up, and visited the outskirts of the tower every day.

And then, coming here, there was Asyut’s sudden departure from the royal palace.

It was said that, according to the king’s orders, he went to pick up the woman alone who served as Celiastina’s substitute.

The king, who was demanded to explain the details to his surroundings, seemed to not respond and just smiled wryly. The king did not open his mouth at all with regard to this matter and persisted “to wait for Asyut’s return”. Of course, his surroundings did not agree.

On the contrary, it was the priest faction led by Roblin that was actively gossiping about this matter. He began to rant loudly about the king’s faction and that for the First Holy Knight Asyut to disappear in this unstable period was because the country was not being managed. He must be thinking that, if possible, he would try to drive Asyut and the king’s faction into a dilemma all together.

But– these strategies in the royal palace meant nothing to Aeneas.

(What was this past year to me?)

What eroded Aeneas' spirit was a vague impatience that could not be expressed in words.

(Who exactly was the Lady Celiastina that I knew. Where is she right now? I don't know anything. Yes, without knowing anything, I've charged forward alone like an idiot. From here– where should I head?)

What in the world was the truth... He didn't know.

He didn't know how to find it either.

Without knowing anything, Aeneas was just repeating his usual days.

Aeneas, who left the training ground, opened the door of the armory that was immediately adjacent to the training ground without strength.

A slightly dusty and bad smell struck his nose. By nature, while training was in progress, it was natural he couldn't see anyone else. Light from the windows only slightly illuminated the room and overall it was dim. Stepping into there with unsteady steps, he set the sword he was using in its original place.

“.....”

This sword was no one's belonging and was simply a provision for soldiers to use as they like. But, for some reason, Aeneas couldn't remove his eyes immediately from that sword.

(If I can never see the Lady Celiastina I know again like this then...)

His eyebrows naturally furrowed.

(Where's the meaning in me continuing to hold a sword.)

“Aeneas.”

At that moment a shadow was cast from behind and Aeneas startled, shoulders jerking.

When he turned around Neisan, who had come at one point, stood in a position that was a little away from Aeneas. His cool expression which showed no emotion was unchanged as always. Instead of feeling relieved at that, he envied that Neisan somewhere.

Neisan was tremendously strong. Even when his own life was exposed to danger, he was not perturbed to the extent that Aeneas was. Even the moment when he and Aeneas learned together that Celiastina was someone else he didn't show any disturbance at all. How did he become so strong? Compared with Aeneas who was much too weak.

"You've looked rough, lately."

Neisan leaned his back against the wall of the armory and spoke in a frank and unreserved manner.

"That's right. It's pathetic."

Aeneas shrugged his shoulders and showed a self-derisive smile.

"I end up thinking about Lady Celiastina no matter what. It's like this past year is falling out entirely from my heart. I don't know how that hole can be filled."

Aeneas muttered up to that point and then shook his head.

"No, sorry, I'll stop complaining to you, Neisan. It's a bad habit of mine. I'll spit out different things to you, feel refreshed, and then end it like that. I have to face myself properly."

Neisan suddenly sent a glance at Aeneas but said nothing about that. Instead, he threw out unforeseen words at Aeneas.

"Lord Linus has summoned for us. Are you willing to meet him?"

"Huh?"

"I don't know what kind of matter we were called for but, in all probability, it is

involved with Celiastina. If you do not feel like it then I intend to go alone.”

Involved with Celiastina. Aeneas’ shoulders shook stiffly at those words.

“...No, I’ll go. I’ll listen to what he has to say.”

Linus’ office couldn’t be said to be a comfortable place for Aeneas.

Aeneas and Neisan were invited to the sofa but they declined and faced him while standing. Linus also matched them and slowly stood from his chair.

“I apologize for calling you to this place. However, I have a request I’d like to ask of you two.”

Linus broached the topic with a smile that could not be read as usual.

“Asyut will soon bring the woman who has served as Celiastina’s substitute for this past year to the royal palace. At that time Celiastina, who is currently confined in the tower, has been arranged to temporarily enter the royal palace. On that occasion, I would like you two to act as Celiastina’s bodyguards.”

He declared that as if it were nothing. But to Aeneas those were words that went on beyond his comprehension, to the point where he wanted each and every word explained in order.

“The Celiastina this past year was certainly an “imposter”. Only, the surface of the word “imposter” sets it so that the surroundings perceive her as an avatar of evil, but this was due to the guidance of the priest faction. In actuality, the real Celiastina is very grateful to her.”

“Lord Linus.”

Aeneas interrupted, unable to bear it.

“Did you know? About... her identity.”

“I wasn’t personally acquainted but I investigated various things and understood through the documents.”

“Whose intention was it to place her as Lady Celiastina’s substitute. The king’s?”

“Who knows, that is not understood. If everything is to become clear then– that would be when Celiastina leaves the tower. I believe it will be the very moment you two are her guards, as I have requested.”

“.....”

When Celiastina left the tower.

Aeneas felt something cold run straight down his back. If everything was to become clear then he should be gladly longing for that moment. He should be. But the ache in his heart was only the emotions of fear and rejection. He felt terrified to face the “two girls”.

“So, what about the matter of guarding her? Will you two undertake it?”

It seemed that Neisan beside him nodded curtly.

Even while perceiving that at the edge of his sight, Aeneas couldn’t nod right away. He only stood there stock-still and was unable to move even a finger.

“...I’m sorry.”

His lips clumsily spun the words.

“Please allow me some time to consider.”

It took all he had to convey only that.

The short interview with Linus ended and Aeneas left the room like he was dragging along a heavy body.

He also separated with Neisan there and walked through the corridor alone. Somewhere in his mind he thought about how he needed to return to the office but that was also like somebody else’s problem. He didn’t feel like returning to the office right away.

Aeneas suddenly stopped while he was walking through the corridor.

When he raised his head, that he tended to look down with, a white building that stood close to the royal palace entered his eyes.

It was the infirmary.

Celiastina – no, what should he call her now – used to come here passionately, this small place of healing. Now it was recognized by the people of the royal palace as the place that held proof of the miracle she caused. The asiatic jasmine, which grew greatly due to the miracle, seemed to keep beautiful flowers that were to the point of spilling over and falling even now.

Aeneas hadn't seen it. Because, for a long time, he hadn't felt like entering the infirmary.

(But it's nostalgic. I had tea with that person over there, didn't I.)

She had treated him, Nasha, and Mislea to a cup of tea she brewed herself. It was a gentle time, like a dream, and a heartrending time. One that may never come back again.

(...To happen to pass by at this time might be fate of some kind.)

It was a mere whim.

Aeneas, who was being buried by emotions that had nowhere to go, wanted something that would draw his eyes away even a little. Aeneas came out of the passage and turned his feet towards the infirmary for the first time in a long while.

When he gently opened the door the bright room, which took in the sunlight, hadn't changed at all.

Far in the unobstructed room he could see the back of Mislea, the head of the infirmary. As she turned around her eyes widened in surprise.

"Oh my, if it isn't Ser Aeneas."

"Hello, it's been a long time. I apologize for the abruptness."

“No, no, I’m happy you showed yourself. But is something the matter?”

Apparently, she seemed to be in the middle of arranging flowers. Mislee inserted the multicolored flowers she was holding in both hands into a vase on a table and walked up to Aeneas while wiping her wet hands on her apron.

“It’s not that I have business. Somehow, this place suddenly became nostalgic.”

“Is that so.”

Mislee did not pursue it deeply and, showing a wide smile, she welcomed Aeneas.

“Nasha happened to come here as well. In her case, it’s every day though. Do you know about the asiatic jasmine in the backyard? Nasha takes time out from her busy schedule to take care of that flower.”

“I see.”

“Ser Aeneas, I insist that you please take a look. It’s really bloomed beautifully, to the point where I’m always captivated by it even after seeing it hundreds of times. –Ah, that’s right, shall I brew some tea?”

“No, I’m fine. Please continue working without minding me.”

“Really? Then I’ll take your kind offer.”

Mislee gave a light nod and returned to her work at hand.

Because he was here already he opened the door at the back of the room and took a step out into the yard.

In that instant, a sweet fragrance blew and tickled Aeneas’ nose. Next, his eyes became fixed on the whole surface of the asiatic jasmine that jumped into his vision, at the full blooms of the asiatic jasmine’s flowers which seemed to drive away his clouded feelings in a second.

(It certainly is beautiful.)

“Ser Aeneas?”

Nasha, who was crouched at the watering place that was installed at the edge of the yard, stood up and turned to face him.

“It’s been a long time, Nasha.”

Aeneas smiled vaguely, feeling awkward. Come to think of it, it’s been quite a long time since he saw her, exactly like his words. If there was no person called Celiastina between them then they were pretty unrelated people. But still, Nasha didn’t feel like just a workplace acquaintance for Aeneas. It might be because he superimposed the appearance of himself on her, who had feelings of trust towards her master that was beyond work.

“It really has been. It’s rare to see you here.”

“Yes, Mislea was also surprised.”

Looking at her like this, Nasha seemed a little thin. She was originally a thin woman, so it might be more correct to say she looked worn down.

“I heard you were taking care of this asiatic jasmine?”

“Rather than taking care, at most I just give it water though... It’s very impressive, isn’t it.”

“Indeed. It’s amazing.”

Nasha looked up at the light pink flowers which were blossoming in full glory, and looking as if they would spill over, with a face that was somewhat proud. Drawn by that, Aeneas also moved his gaze to the asiatic jasmine.

“At any rate, Ser Aeneas, your complexion is somewhat bad.”

Before he knew it, at some point in time, Nasha turned her head only to him.

“Is that so.”

“Are you properly eating and taking time to sleep? It’s not good to live recklessly.”

“I’m fine and I’m taking care of myself.”

In answer to Aeneas, who smiled wryly and nodded, Nasha showed a similar smile.

“...You must think I’ve thinned to the point where I can’t say that to other people, right? In truth, that is true. But, even like this, I’ve recovered quite a lot. There was a time where I was even thinner.”

“Really?”

Aeneas widened his eyes. Not many days passed since Celiastina disappeared from in front of them, objectively counting. How did she lose weight in this short time?

“After Lady Celiastina disappeared, I cried every day for a while. Because of that, food wouldn’t pass through my throat and even when I laid on my bed at night I couldn’t sleep at all. My boss told me to take time off and return to my parents’ house, but I was in such a terrible state that I couldn’t show my parents that and so I managed to be left as I was.”

“...So, that’s how it was. I’m sorry I wasn’t any help.”

No, Nasha shook her head.

“I’m sure both of us were in pain.”

“Have you settled down a little now?”

“Yes, somehow. I was able to think little by little that even if I continued to cry, to the extent where I could bathe in tears, it would be of no use.”

Even such a delicate woman was much stronger than him. On the other hand, how about himself? He was staying forever in one place and holding his knees, unmoving.

“Nasha, you’re amazing. I can’t quite change my feelings.”

“I’m not amazing at all, you know. I’d say I was saved by the words Mislee gave me.”

“Mislee’s words?”

“It’s decided that Lady Celiastina will be able to return soon and, at that time, are you alright with welcoming her in that state? Is what she said. How do I say this, they weren’t words of comfort, but it showed how Mislee really believes that Lady

Celiastina will be able to return. And then I was convinced that she was right.”

Aren’t I simple? Nasha, who gave a carefree laugh, looked dazzling.

“I only thought about everything that happened up to now and became apathetic. Things like what the time I was together with Lady Celiastina in this past year meant. Why no one told me anything. Only things like that. But, as I changed my feelings and tried to think about things in the future, a lot of things I wanted to do came to mind. That in and of itself is hard work.”

“Like watering the asiatic jasmine every day?”

“Exactly! If Lady Celiastina is able to come home, I want to show her the healthy blooming asiatic jasmine. Also, I’m challenging myself to make pastries. I have to eat lots of sweet ones with Lady Celiastina.”

“...I see, you’re right.”

Aeneas looked up at the asiatic jasmine again.

If the Celiastina he knew would come home. –She is coming home, is what Linus said. Aeneas knew the reason why he hadn’t rejoiced at that. It’s because something was sure to change at that time. Things wouldn’t stay the same as they were up to now. It might be a good change; however, it might be a bad change. Aeneas was afraid of that.

Losing the past, mourning that, and still adhering to that. Aeneas was imprisoned too much by his own heart.

But that was no good.

Instead.

He would raise his head and look around at his surroundings. He would accept the future–.

(The Lady Celiastina I knew surely did that.)

At this late hour, he finally remembered.

No matter what circumstances she was placed in she would never stop and didn’t give

up. And she was a person who continued to walk, facing forward. He should have always seen that at a close distance.

(What am I doing now with stopping.)

Even if he couldn't get back the same days, the present would always continue from there, and he would live for the future.

"...Nasha, thank you. I've also managed to break through somehow."

"Let's wait together for our Lady Celiastina. Because I'm sure she'll come home soon."

Aeneas was able to nod honestly.

And then he made an address to Asyut who wasn't here right now.

(I beg you, please bring her home without problems.)

Because they believed and were waiting.

Chapter Nine

You and those priests of the royal palace...!

Because of you, that girl, Yuna is--!!

Hariet's despair-filled cries echoed repeatedly in the depths of Asyut's ears.

Yuna was in danger.

The instant that thought came Asyut broke into a run from that spot like a shot. Slipping through everyone who was taken aback, he wasn't even able to care about Hariet, Rendo, and Madela, and left the bar at full speed.

(No, for them to come this far!)

He ran and ran and ran through the dark streets at night, aiming for the tallest tower in this town.

Let him make it on time. Please, let him make it on time.

Although it was a small town he felt that the distance to the church was extremely long. He was breathing hard and his breaths were so hot it seemed to burn the back of his throat. Because he rushed out empty-handed, only the moonlight was reliable in the night of the town where there were few street lights.

The church that he could faintly see in the distance under the cover of the night approached little by little. He saw a great number of large torch lights wriggling at the foot of that tower. One, two, three... Asyut clenched his teeth strongly at the large amount of lights which he couldn't count right away.

And then, when he arrived at the church at last, there was a crowd of people around it.

The residents were staring in bewilderment at men clothed in priest robes. When he quickly sent his gaze around, there seemed to be three in all. They were straddling horses and staring at the entrance as if surrounding the church. In addition, there were more than ten men who looked like mercenaries. Each and every one was carrying a weapon and facing the church in the same way.

What was being pierced by their arrogant gazes was – ah, what was with this – just one person, the old priest Maurice who was Yuna’s grandfather. He stood in the way of the church’s entrance with his old body and was desperately confronting the priests so as not to let them enter inside.

(The priests– are they priests under Roblin. Or...)

Asyut grit his teeth strongly. –Or the king’s pursuing party?

In any case, this situation was the worst.

What Yuna’s parents were afraid of had become reality. The royal palace’s envoy had finally discovered the existence of Yuna, the miraculous sleeping girl and the “imposter saint”, and were trying to take her away as a wicked thing to the royal palace.

“No matter how much these are orders of priests from the royal palace I cannot step aside here!”

He could hear Maurice’s protesting with a voice that was already hoarse.

Asyut forced his way through the crowd, moving forward little by little while feeling heart-stricken.

“Please, as people who believe equally in God, I beg of you to stop and lower your weapons!”

But it was not seen at all that the priests were moved by that appeal. Even though he appealed with all his heart, it was clear they had no intention in the least to overlook him.

(It’s my fault.)

An unspeakable anger along with disappointment settled in Asyut’s body.

(I erred on everything.)

“Do not make us tell you again, step aside from there.”

One of the priests spat that out coldly.

“Under the God, Vida, the heretical daughter must receive judgment. For that, this daughter will be taken to the royal palace. Those who obstruct the way will all be regarded similarly as heretics.”

“No matter what you say, I absolutely cannot step aside.”

“I suppose the words of a priest cannot get through to a heretic.”

The priest on a horse sent his gaze to the mercenaries.

“Everyone receives the divine protection of our God, Vida. Therefore, although it is a degenerate body, I do not wish to do anything that would hurt you... However, I have no choice. Acknowledge your sins and resign yourself to receiving punishment.”

A small scream leaked out from the surroundings. In front of the church, Maurice’s body stiffened.

The mercenaries, who received a signal, began to slowly close the distance. It was a disgusting movement as if they were tormenting a prey. And then when they drew their weapons– Asyut, who had jumped out of the crowd, thrust one of them away as hard as he could from the side.

“Uwoah.”

The mercenary’s stance collapsed at the surprise attack and turned a surprised face to Asyut. While his opponent staggered, Asyut quickly twisted that arm up and threw the large body to the ground. The instant the man struck the ground the other mercenaries stopped moving immediately with confusion.

“Don’t lay a hand on him.”

Asyut made his low voice resound.

“Stand your mercenaries down.”

“Who are you.”

One of the priests asked with irritation. Asyut did not answer and glared at them fiercely.

“I will say it once more. Stand your mercenaries down.”

“That cannot be done, because summoning of the heretical daughter to the royal palace is a mission given to us.”

“On whose orders?”

“That is irrelevant to something such as you. Everything is understood to be by the guidance of God.”

The priests’ firm attitude did not collapse all the more. In carrying out this duty it seemed it was within their expectations from the beginning for small disturbances to enter. That was clear to all with them bringing more than ten mercenaries.

“Dad!”

A shout from Rendo, who seemed to have run to this place late, leapt into Asyut’s ears.

When he moved his gaze slightly to confirm he saw Rendo, Hariet, and Madela trying to rush out here from crowd of people but they were pulled back by the other residents.

“Y-You are the traveler...? Were you not the one to call for them?”

Maurice’s hoarse voice was heard from behind him. Asyut continued to glare at the front and did not reply. No, he couldn’t. Asyut didn’t call them, however this result was the same as if he had–.

(I can regret later.)

Now wasn’t the time to be overcome by feelings, Asyut told himself. No matter what happened, he had to protect this place without fail. He could not afford to let a single wound be given, not to this old priest– and, of course, not to Yuna who was sleeping deep in the church.

“Capture this man.”

The priest’s brief words served as the trigger and the mercenaries to move again.

Everyone burst towards Asyut alone without hesitation. Naturally, in terms of the number of people, Asyut was at an overwhelming disadvantage. However, Asyut was unfazed. It was clear, looking at their movements, that they were just a disorderly mob.

He slipped to the side of the first person’s spear lunge and, grasping the handle, kicked his opponent’s abdomen. He struck the man with the butt of the spear he had stolen and the man sunk down quickly. If, during this time, the other mercenaries had gone around to Asyut’s back then Asyut might have been forced into a hard fight. However, even that didn’t happen. The mercenaries were so wary of Asyut that they spent too long weighing the moment to close the distance.

Asyut had not the slightest intention to match his opponents’ movements. Sweeping the spear like that, he sent the sword of a nearby person flying. And, as he spun, he smashed the man who become defenceless sharply with the butt of the spear again. The man gave a silent scream and then, following that, groaned like a beast. The remaining mercenaries stared, half-dumbfounded, at their comrades who were writhing with expressions of agony.

Their breaths caught at Asyut’s glare as he held the spear.

“Do you intend to continue still? If so, I will not hold back.”

The remaining mercenaries only stood stock-still there as if they were frozen.

“What are you all doing, I said to capture that man!”

However, the priest’s angry voice echoed in the dark night and the mercenaries were spurred on whether they wanted to or not. It seemed that, now that it had become like this, they could not run away and so they strengthened their resolve. They rushed towards Asyut all at once mindlessly. Although Asyut was calmly handling their attack, it would not be easy to oppose close to ten people and cover the old man at his back.

And a sight that was even more of a final blow lay in wait for Asyut.

From the distance, it was apparent that several other lights were approaching.

(No, it can't be a fresh supply of people, can it?)

If so, that would be– intense.

Asyut, while clicking his tongue, knocked a man in front of him to the ground first.

In that spare moment, he threw a glance to that distant sight. There seemed to be at least more than ten new torch lights. From the quick speed they were approaching it seemed the enemies were riding horses.

(What will I do.)

Impatience began to dominate Asyut slowly. As he told himself to calm down he floored another man. There remained seven mercenaries in front of him. However, if the newcomers were added then the number of people would double in a stroke.

“...Who are those people.”

At that moment the priests, who were watching the situation from on their horses, muttered that in a puzzled voice.

(What?)

Their reactions were entirely unexpected to Asyut.

(Is it possible they don't know that group either?)

He thought they were the priest faction's reinforcements, but if that wasn't the case then...

Who exactly were they–.

Soon the torch light bearers arrived before the church. Asyut was all the more surprised when he found a familiar face among all the sturdy men present there.

“You all, throw away your weapons!”

A man, who let loose an especially intense intimidating air, ordered that in a voice that carried while being low.

That man was once hostile to Asyut as a person who opposed the royal palace, the former anti-saint faction's Ghada.

(What is this. Why are they here.)

There was Ghada and then behind him his younger sister, Milifaire, and following her, Jin. And the others must have been former anti-saint faction members as well.

They did not send a glance to Asyut, who was taken aback, and faced the mercenaries, pointing the tips of their swords directly at them. The instant that happened the mercenaries were visibly flustered, and the end result was them dropping their weapons. It was obvious their appearance was strange.

"W-Who exactly are you all."

The priests were driven into an unfavorable situation in an instant, but still they raised their voices which did not lose their conceit only. However, what use was something like conceit in this place.

"How about ending this and giving up."

At any rate, he had to get through this place. Asyut continued holding his weapon and advanced one step. The mercenaries, who were wholly terrified, no longer showed a fragment of fighting spirit and were completely timid.

"If you resist any more, I do not intend to keep silent even if you are priests."

"What insolence!"

The priests on horseback looked down on Asyut even more domineeringly.

"To oppose us is the same as opposing God."

"...Do you still not know who I am?"

"W-What did you say."

Certainly, it was hard to see each other's faces well in this darkness. The priests raised their torch lights forward in a cautionary manner, but even then it only showed Asyut's stature at most.

“What are you. Announce yourself.”

“I am the First Holy Knight, Asyut.”

Asyut introduced himself as they wished.

Mixed with the sound of the torch light crackling was the priests’ breaths catching. Even the priest, Maurice, who was standing behind Asyut must have heard the words now.

“Lord... Asyut, you say?!”

The priests’ voices shook right there.

That was also only natural. The status of the First Holy Knight was not a light thing for mere priests to look down on from their horse and to give orders to. Of course, doing something like pointing a sword at him was absurd.

“It can’t be, there’s no way.”

The three priests finally descended from their horses and stood on the ground. Neither the mercenaries nor the surrounding residents should have heard the conversation just now, but they watched the proceedings that suddenly changed like the wind with held breaths.

Asyut himself walked up to the front of the priests. At this point-blank range even they could not mistake Asyut’s face.

The priests lost their words this time and stood stock-still.

“...L-Lord Asyut, to not have noticed you, we have been dreadfully rude. Please, I beg of you, grant us your pardon.”

In an instant, they changed their attitudes quickly and lowered their heads courteously.

“For reasons, we were to ask you to return back to the royal palace before you arrived at this town, Lord Asyut. And we were told that, in return, we would bring the daughter to the royal palace.”

“Who ordered that. Roblin?”

“Exactly as you say.”

Perhaps their terror was too great, the priests only murmured that, shrinking back. It seemed more effective to flash his authority at them rather than a sword.

“Hereafter, you are not allowed to enter this church without exception. Even if you have received any orders from Roblin, this is absolute.”

“...Understood.”

The priests gave a low bow again. Even if they didn’t agree, they couldn’t defy Asyut.

And then immediately, because of Ghada and the others, the priests and mercenaries were gathered in one place. The mercenaries did not resist at all. Ghada moved silently with his lips pursed tightly, but the mercenaries turned their faces to him from time to time, as if wanting to say something. However, though Ghada noticed that he did not respond.

Lowering their heads again, the mercenaries curled themselves up as if they were criminals. In contrast, the priests seemed clearly discontent. Asyut watched them with a sour expression. Even though the crisis had gone away for the moment, it seemed like there was a driving rain and wind in his heart.

–It made him clearly realize that he was a person on that side.

“Father...!”

Hariet flew out of the crowd of people. She hugged Maurice like that and, sobbing unbearably, she buried her face into his shoulder. Maurice gently held Hariet. Rendo and Madela also walked slowly over here; their eyes damp with confusion pierced Asyut.

“...I apologize deeply.”

Asyut apologized to them first. There was too much to apologize for that only those words came to mind.

“Who exactly are you?”

The one who answered Rendo's mutter was Maurice who was soothing Hariet.

"The First Holy Knight, Lord Asyut."

"Huh...?"

Madela, at a loss, looked up at Asyut.

"That was the name given earlier, if I'm correct?"

"Yes, there is no mistake. I apologize for having lied about my identity."

"N-No way. The First Holy Knight... that one?"

Hariet was also similarly flustered. Naturally, because, regardless of how she realized that Asyut had come from the royal palace, she would have thought he was a government official at most.

"Why has someone with such an exalted status come to this place. Is it on the royal palace's orders, like we thought?"

On the other hand, Rendo looked calm.

"No, that is not the case."

Asyut raised his lowered head and faced Rendo and the others directly. Even if he couldn't get them to believe him, he had to convey just this.

"I lied about my identity but everything I have talked about up to now is the truth. About how I have spent this past year together with Yuna in the royal palace, how I wish to wake her up again, and how I came to this town wishing for only that."

"...I don't... understand anything anymore."

Madela shook her head loosely and leaned against her husband, Rendo, with a haggard appearance.

"Regarding that, please allow me to explain slowly. I'd like to tell you all about everything up to now."

“We would like to hear as well. I won’t let you say we are outsiders.”

It was Ghada, who had taken along with him the members of the former anti-saint faction, that raised a voice which carried his spirit while being moderate.

“I heard that the Celiastina we confronted was an imposter. That the person who stood there at the time was a completely different girl. That girl is Yuna, the one brought up just now, right?”

Asyut turned around to Ghada and nodded. He peeked at his sister, Milifaire, who he hadn’t seen in a long time, in Ghada’s shadow. Her serious eyes were turned to Asyut without any timidity.

“...First, let me thank you for your support. But why are you all here?”

“We were dispatched by orders of the king. The underlings of the priests over there are—”

He jerked his chin to point at the caught mercenaries.

“—originally members of the anti-saint faction that fought together with us. A few days ago, I received information from the king’s faction that there were people acting suspiciously among the released members. It was said that if we could assist you and prevent the worst scenario then he would also think about the treatment of those who were complicit... I didn’t want to act like the king’s dog, but I can’t abandon my former comrades.”

Ghada’s words must have reached the mercenaries who were gathered in one place. They lowered their heads even deeper, as if they had nowhere to turn their faces.

“The king...”

Asyut secretly clenched his fists tighter.

According to the priests’ words, it was Roblin who sent them. In other words, Roblin tried to take away Yuna by himself without waiting for Asyut’s return. So then, how did he know where Yuna’s location was—.

(Was it during the meeting with Lady Celiastina?)

The informal meeting that was held in the Priest Tower. Asyut had even felt something in him catch at Roblin waiting outside understandably at the time. That he left alone his sense of discomfort was another of Asyut's mistakes. It was likely Roblin had been eavesdropping on their conversation at the time.

No- or was it...

In any case, in order to stop the priests that Roblin prepared, reinforcements were sent from the king. The king did not censure Asyut's actions and, conversely, was willing to help.

(I thought I was discarded at last.)

But that was not the case, it seemed. Or did the king have other thoughts?

"For now, let us settle the priests and mercenaries of the attack, and enter the church. We cannot cause any more trouble to the residents of the town. There, I would like to hear Lord Asyut's story. Is everyone agreeable with that?"

Everyone nodded at Father Maurice's suggestion. Madela and Hariet still looked distracted but they still obediently followed everyone.

When the door to the church opened, a quiet and clear air poured out, as if the disturbance just now was an illusion.

It was a small sanctuary that enveloped everything; good and evil, joy and sorrow.

In here, Yuna was sleeping.

†

The moon was probably illuminating this church from its highest point.

The explanation had spanned over a long time and it was already the dead of the night now.

Asyut told them the majority of the events in the royal palace this past year without hiding anything. The only thing he didn't dare to talk about was Celiastina's childhood and her distorted ability. It was because he wanted Celiastina herself to tell them in her own words one day.

During the time Asyut spoke, everyone listened with serious expressions. He didn't know how much he got them to believe in. But he just told them the truth.

"...So, Yuna spent this past year in the royal palace in the place of the Lady Saint?"

Madela, who finished listening to everything, asked that as if to confirm.

"Yes, that's right. There are many who were saved by her earnestness and pure heart. In truth, Yuna was a saint who was more like a saint than anyone else."

"I can't believe that child did all that. She was a softhearted and gentle girl since back then, but she's the same as any normal child anywhere."

Asyut shook his head at Hariet's murmur.

"No matter what happened she was a person who never gave up. While having consideration for others, she walked directly on the path she believed in. I think she is a very strong woman."

"Was she the one who confronted us in front of the main gates?"

It was Ghada, who managed the anti-saint faction, that revealed a complicated mental state. At that time, they faced Celiastina wagering their lives. Now that it had become another person entirely, it was natural they could not feel calm.

"...I can't accept this at all."

Milifaire, who had been nothing but silent until now, suddenly opened her mouth.

"The saint was an imposter, but it's impossible to think that bygones are bygones and to stop my feelings as a result. Brother, from your story just now, Celiastina's soul might have been right beside her at that time but there's no meaning in that at all. I wanted my thoughts and feelings to hit Celiastina directly in any form."

Her voice was vividly blotted with frustration and cheerlessness.

"I absolutely won't accept this."

And then she stood up like that with great force. The chair she had been sitting in tilted with a loud noise but, not even caring about that, Milifaire left the church.

“Hey, Mille, wait.”

Jin chased after her in a hurry and left the church similarly.

“I’m of the same opinion as Mille as well.”

Although Ghada, who crossed his arm tightly, did not follow them he announced that in a low voice.

“I cannot accept this.”

Asyut also did not deny their thoughts and feelings. Asyut himself was unable to forgive Celiastina still even now. And surely– in the future too, it would be difficult. That Asyut could face forward now was not because he forgave her. Those thoughts, even now, haven’t changed.

“Sorry, but returning to the topic...”

Rendo calmly opened his mouth.

“So, Lady Celiastina’s power is the only hope to wake up Yuna, is it?”

“Yes, that’s right. We can only bet on Lady Celiastina’s ability now.”

“But Lady Celiastina can’t leave the royal palace.”

Asyut had to nod at Hariet’s mutter.

“That’s why I would like to take Yuna to the royal palace. I came to this town for that sake.”

“Yuna to the royal palace...”

Rendo made a difficult expression.

“But, like the church that attacked earlier, there must be many in the royal palace who do not like Yuna’s existence. Will it really end safely with taking Yuna to the royal palace...?”

His concern was natural. Madela and Hariet also showed the same uneasy expression.

However, only Father Maurice was not like that.

He gave a single nod as if he decided in his mind.

“Let’s believe in Lord Asyut.”

It was hoarse but his dignified voice echoed inside the church.

“Lord Asyut, I will take you to Yuna who is sleeping in the back. Please follow me.”

He entered the back of the church for the first time.

There were many doors lined in a row at the back of the passage but Maurice passed by all of them. Asyut did the same, following after him in silence. Before long, stairs which extended underground appeared before the both of them.

Maurice stopped in front of that for a moment and gave a faint sigh. It was a small sigh that wouldn’t have been noticed if it hadn’t been this painfully quiet. And then he slowly took a step forward. The stiff sound of the bottom of his shoe landing on hard stone echoed.

Asyut was looking at the sight before his eyes like in some kind of dream.

His heart was beating violently to the point of pain. But even that felt like it was someone else’s problem somewhere else. Asyut only followed the priest down the stairs, not even knowing if his feet were on the ground anymore.

At last he could see her. He could see her–.

Only that real feeling slowly but steadily spread through Asyut’s heart.

When he descended the stairs, a narrow passage continued before his eyes. At the end of this passage stood the front of a double door. The wrinkled hand of the priest was placed on the door. And then, along with a heavy noise, the door opened gradually.

There was a small room.

A room with nothing– except for a single pedestal placed right in the center.

It was a long horizontal pedestal decorated with elaborate engravings. There were many layers of dazzlingly white cloth that was spread over it. And overflowing blue flowers in bloom were scattered on top looking as if they were protecting their beloved master.

That beloved master– was no other than a single girl lying on the pedestal.

Asyut did not wait for the priest's guide and took a single step forward.

And another step.

And then another step again.

The fragrance of sweet flowers wrapped around the pedestal like a veil.

As Asyut approached the girl the thicker the fragrance became and he felt dizzy.

The girl was wearing a comfortable white one-piece dress.

The slightly wavy brown hair was just beyond her shoulders a little. Currently, it was spread loosely on top of the pedestal and seemed to be soft from what he could see. Her pale skin was tinged with a faint red and let him feel that life was certainly remaining in her.

–It was Yuna.

One look and he was convinced.

Asyut walked up right beside the pedestal and stared at her, dazed, and stood on the spot like that for a while.

By the time he noticed, there were tears falling down his cheek.

But he didn't feel like wiping them.

The emotions overflowing from his heart were much too large.

So, so large that they could not be exchanged with something like tears.

–Aah.

“Finally, I've met you.”

He whispered that in a hoarse voice. Holding out his left hand he softly touched her cheek.

It was warm.

She was alive.

She was certainly alive.

Just that alone saved Asyut.

Taking her hand, which was clasped underneath her chest, he tried squeezing it strongly. Right now that hand still didn't return his hold.

But it was alright now.



They really came a long way–.

From that moment they first met in that valley.

Not knowing anything, he threw his heart of hatred at Yuna, and struck her painfully many times. And then he began to feel perplexed at her figure who continued to walk forward despite that. He wondered when it was that he noticed he was drawn to her. He acknowledged his feelings and then he lost her.

He could hardly believe that all those events occurred in a single year.

“Please wait just a while longer.”

Asyut spoke to Yuna.

Because he would ensure she was woken without exception.

Chapter Ten

A little break in the weather could be seen.

Linus suddenly stopped in the hallway and gazed surreptitiously at the one streak of light visible from the sky, covered by thick clouds, outside the window.

Truthfully, there was no time to be staring leisurely out the window, because he had to attend an important meeting from here. However, Linus' heart was oddly calm and it was that reason that made him unable to feel like heading to the meeting room in a hurry.

In contrast to Linus, the people he passed in the hallway some time ago were all restless. There were many whose faces were clouded, not losing to the cloudy weather today, and a clear different air unlike the usual dominated the royal palace.

But that was also something inevitable.

By this time, five days had passed since the First Holy Knight, representing the country, abruptly disappeared from the royal palace.

When the report about Ashut leaving the royal palace alone came from the guards at the west gate, the top officials of the royal palace furrowed their brows once but no one made a grandiose ruckus.

It wasn't possible for that too serious First Holy Knight to take such a reckless action at a time like this. Everyone thought this. That there must have been some mistake and even now he must be working hard at his duties.

However, when it was apparently noticed that Asyut really was nowhere in the royal palace, everyone's chaos was too pathetic. Inquiries at many levels also came flooding to Linus, to the point where that day ended without him doing anything like work.

As a man said to be the most trusted person in the royal palace, who always thinks about the country and is serious and steady, why did he do this-. It was because the

royal palace had been constantly suffering due to Saint Celiastina that they were granted a shock at Asyut's recent actions, when their hearts had relied on him, as something that was suddenly hard to believe.

(They should have shown that trust to him much earlier.)

The people of the royal palace had always treated Asyut's existence as something that was a matter of course.

Was there anyone who wondered how much he killed his heart, threw away everything, and devoted his body and soul to that position?

(He may have even decided already not to return.)

He departed by the king's orders. Once it was confirmed Asyut left those words, everyone went to request an explanation from the king unanimously.

The king's response to them was only one thing, "Wait for Asyut's return".

However, Linus, and others like him, even felt amusement inside at how Asyut did quite an impressive thing as well. To throw everything onto the king was something the young man, up to now, wouldn't have ever decided to do.

On the other hand, there were also people who accepted these series of events happily.

Those were the people of the priest faction lead by Roblin.

That Asyut rushed out of the royal palace at this delicate time could be said to be a clear failure. If it was ordered by the king then the issue of where the responsibility lay was with the king himself. For the priests, who had no grounds to stand due to Celiastina's matter recently, this must have been suitable material for a counterattack.

If, for example, it was not the king's will but an action based on Asyut's own decision then Asyut should be blamed this time. Since he was originally a First Holy Knight who was hard to handle and close to the king, if they could question his responsibility in this opportunity, they could take away his authority to a certain extent.

Moreover, even if his authority could not be broken with this incident, there was the existence of the imposter saint.

A fake saint– quite some time had passed since Yuna disappeared from the royal palace. The king’s faction’s explanation that she was missing was still unchanged and everything continued to be vague.

With Asyut’s departure this time, the focus came onto Yuna once again.

If circumstances permitted, they could question the king’s faction about how the fake saint was placed in position in this past year. To deliberately replace the saint was an enormous problem that was unprecedented. What the priest faction wanted to press in on was nothing less than that point.

(But, in actuality, I received a report from Ser Siegcrest that Lord Asyut’s departure from the royal palace was because of a secret agreement with Father Roblin.)

Roblin must have switched over and decided it was a better plan to use this matter as a weapon to hound the king than to wait quietly for Asyut’s return.

Even at the meeting that was about to start now, he could see Asyut’s matter being raised as an issue.

Publicly, it was a nominal meeting to persuade the priest faction who had confined Celiastina in the Priest Tower. The king’s faction intended to thrust an ultimatum at them that would tear off the mask of this discussion. And say that, if they will not release the saint then they could not wait anymore– it was time for a separation.

If that happened, there was no doubt the priest’s faction would use the current events as a counterattack to buy time.

But.

(Now, I wonder if it’ll go that well.)

The discussion with the priest faction was held in the “Great Scholar Room”, which was used only for the utmost important topics.

The king’s faction, including Linus, was a total of five members with the king at the top of the list and then his aides. In contrast, the priest’s faction had a total of four people, apart from Roblin there were key priests who often participated in normal joint

meetings. The room wasn't very large and, when its large desk was enclosed by this number of people, the surrounding was filled with an unpleasant pressure from just that.

Roblin, who just so happened to be sitting right across from Linus, showed a severe expression that held no fragments of civility as usual. However, only his eyes were glittering brightly, as if he were a ferocious beast targeting a prey. The other priests had a somewhat uncomfortable expression and each of them were sitting with their heads looking down.

"Thank you for assembling today despite your busy schedules."

The civil official, who was the facilitator, looked over the gathering faces and broke the ice.

"The agenda this time is about the future treatment of the Lady Saint, Celiastina."

"As we both do not have time, allow me to offer a full report of our intentions frankly."

The one who raised his voice promptly was Roblin, as expected.

"Lady Celiastina cannot be released as is. Our opinion is unchanged up to now. There are too many things lacking clarity to bring the saint, who is a messenger of God, from the tower. First, those things need to be made clear or there will not be a discussion."

"Pardon me."

One of the aides of the king's faction raised their hand.

"Those are quite ambiguous words. What is lacking clarity?"

"First, above all, it is about Lady Celiastina's movements. Because the saint has been spending her days up to now on the king's side, we were also late in understanding the situation, but in this past year she was replaced with a completely different girl. Of course, it is impossible for a simple countryside girl to suddenly become Lady Celiastina's substitution. It has to be someone who was prepared."

"And you are saying it was us?"

"In order to make that clear, it is necessary to listen to the story of the person

themselves who was replaced.”

In that case, another aide said and raised their voice.

“Why not inquire with Lady Celiastina, who you have currently confined in the tower.”

“The Lady Saint will not say anything related to this matter. I fear it is likely that she is in distress over the punishment to be handed down to the girl who served as her substitute. Lady Celiastina is truly a gentle woman... However, that is precisely why we must reveal the truth with our own hands or we will not be able to explain ourselves to God. The imposter saint needs to be brought to the royal palace. Unless we hear everything from her mouth, we cannot proceed forward.”

“.....”

The aides looked at each other.

The king continued to sit with an air of composure and did not open his mouth at all.

“That Celiastina does not try to talk about the situation is nothing more than your arbitrary explanation. Whether she’s truly keeping silent and, if so, what thoughts does she have, those are what should come before us to allow a judgment to be made.”

When Linus opened his mouth in their stead, Roblin’s eyebrows arched up greatly in that instant.

“Do you mean for Lady Celiastina to prove herself? How dare you propose that very idea. Even still, you are that lady’s guardian! It is truly deplorable.”

“May I ask you not to change the point at issue. What does Celiastina think about this current matter? This is a talk about how we also have the right to ascertain that. It is not about her proving herself or not proving herself.”

It was about time Celiastina should be released.

He didn’t intend for her to be kept in this old man’s bird cage for as long as that man liked.

“...When the appropriate time comes, we will respect Lady Celiastina’s opinion. However, now is not the time. Surely, you must also understand.”

“I do not understand. When is it the appropriate time?”

“First, there is nothing to say until Lord Asyut returns. For him to leave the royal palace in these difficult times, I wonder if he will not return at all? According to what I heard, his departure was due to the order of the king. Is that true?”

Roblin’s gaze shifted to the king.

It was none other than Roblin himself who instigated Lord Asyut though. Linus snorted inwardly. It was clear he was using Asyut’s words as a shield to pull out some sort of promise from the king.

“The king will not speak about this matter until Lord Asyut’s return.”

An aide struck back businesslike, but of course Roblin was not convinced.

“Why. Lord Asyut is trying to bring the girl who deceived the saint to the royal palace, is he not. May I not consider that to be for the sake of clarifying the facts? In that case, it should not be necessary to keep silent. –Or, conversely, do you intend to butcher the truth in the darkness?”

“You had best be careful what you say, Father Roblin.”

Linus remonstrated him in a gentle tone.

“Allow me to say what should be said. I am uneasy and I would like you all to consider this. If Lord Asyut had left to receive the girl, knowing her location, then is it not long past the time he should have returned? –Does he truly have any intention to return? In the beginning, I thought that if everything would become clear by waiting for his return then I agreed to try waiting. However, does it not seem like he will not return anymore?”

Those words of Roblin caused a small commotion not just with the king’s aides but also the other priests. Overcoming their positions, they exchanged looks and confirmed whether there was anyone waiting for answers on Asyut’s matter. And then, in the end, their entangled gazes were collected on the king.

However, the king still didn’t open his mouth.

“Even I do not wish to think like that. However, when I reflect on this past year, Lord

Asyut adores the imposter saint greatly. It should be evident, even to outsiders, that he opened his heart to that girl. If he chose the path of fleeing together with the imposter saint then..."

He wondered if Roblin's concerns were real or not. Right now, he was seriously losing his temper at Asyut who hadn't returned no matter how long they waited.

"If Lord Asyut disregarded the real Lady Celiastina and, of all things, chose the imposter saint then it would be an eternal embarrassment to all of us here. He, who opened his heart to a wicked being, would no longer be suited as the First Holy Knight."

A heavy silence descended on the spot.

The other priests did not advance any objections, of course. However, at the same time, there was no one who tried to open their mouths in the king's faction either. They may have been suppressed by Roblin's threatening attitude but, above all, his left no room for a rebuttal.

In such a place, Linus snickered.

The wrinkles between Roblin's eyebrows deepened even more at that moment.

"Ah, pardon me, it was because Father Roblin's imagination is plentiful. I believe it must be difficult to have that many imaginary worries."

"If you do not even see the reality floating in front of you when you take into account the situation calmly, then you do not have what is needed to carry the heavy responsibility of the country."

"No, what you are seeing is not reality. In the end it is a delusion."

"What did you say?"

In the instant Roblin objected to Linus.

The knock resounded quietly and the tense air of the spot was smashed quickly.

This time everyone turned their heads to the door.

“Excuse my intrusion.”

The ones who entered were the Priestess Yodel and the Vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights, Siecrest. No one could grasp the situation at this strange arrangement.

Yodel, without looking at the people in this place, stepped forward in silence.

Her body was clothed in her constant habitual dark purple priest cloth. That, in this moment, her appearance looked like a mourner was perhaps because of her painfully subdued expression.

Yodel walked directly to Roblin’s side with her back held rigidly straight.

“Won’t you end this, Father Roblin.”

She spoke with a soft voice.

“W-What are you speaking of all of sudden.”

Roblin was taken aback and looked up at Yodel.

“Let’s end it already.”

“Who do you think you are stepping into an important meeting and spouting these things!”

“To use the Lady Saint’s status to aim for self-protection– there is no meaning to such a thing anymore.”

“What are you...”

“I am thinking about the future of this country, that was your favorite phrase in the past. Perhaps you once encouraged yourself by reciting those words. However, now it is different. Now, when you speak those words, it is only when you wish to move things for yourself and to use the pardon of the magic words that it is for the country and for God.”

“Wha.”

Yodel’s words were calm but the contents were exceptionally rude and frank.

It was as if Roblin's anger was so much that he had forgotten even his words already. The others were also like that and just watched the proceedings with their mouths open, dumbfounded. Among them, only the king was leaking out chuckles, unable to hold back.

"Father Roblin, please, I beg of you to stop already."

"There is a limit to insulting others! What does a little girl like you understand."

No, Yodel said and shook her head.

"I am surely closer to you than anyone else here. I believe I understand your distress and sense of crisis more than anyone else. But still, no, but that is precisely why I dare to say that which must be said."

Roblin glared at Yodel with bloodshot eyes. Linus thought it was a look that could kill someone. And yet, Yodel did not show a scared appearance; she was a courageous woman at heart.

"I would like you to recall once more, right now, what it is that we should aim for originally. Is it only the power to stand equal to the king that shines dazzlingly at the end of your prayers?"

"That is not true."

"Should we not be content to serve God with one heart and mind?"

"Of course, however simply praying will not change anything in this world."

"You are too much a slave."

"To what exactly!"

"To the ideal world you desire."

Yodel's face twisted in pain.

"You have been taken prisoner by your ideals and have lost sight of reality. Even though what is truly precious and what is necessary is all in reality... I learned that from my own experiences. Father Roblin, with who you are, surely you have noticed

this. Please, I ask of you, stop already.”

Perhaps it was due to the humiliation but Roblin’s fists, which were clenched on top of the table, shook.

“...Old man, you’ve really done it now.”

Siegcrest had been watching at the entrance of the room but he called out to Roblin in an even voice. But just how many people in this spot noticed that a violent anger was placed in there. Siegcrest, who wore his anger quietly, stood at the entrance with his arms crossed and did not move.

“A report from my men came in just now. Roblin, you used thugs from the former anti-saint faction to send assassins to the “imposter saint”.”

“W-What are you saying at your own convenience! I haven’t done anything.”

Roblin tried to deny this with a startled face, but–

“It’s useless to play dumb.”

He was warned by Siegcrest’s cold voice without a moment’s delay.

“We confirmed the circumstances with ex-members who did not join in with the assassins. They said a man, who hid his identity, commissioned an assassination on a girl named Yuna. Having suspicions about the impossibly high reward, they secretly investigated and it was made clear that the client was you, Roblin. Some members seemed to accept, led by the reward, but apparently their leader, Ghada, chased after them right away to stop them.”

“Wait, what in the world are you talking about!”

“You don’t know when to give up!”

There, for the first time, Siegcrest’s voice roughened, but Roblin also did not keep silent.

“T-There’s a mistake. I know nothing!”

Roblin denied it with a desperate look but, in contrast, the surrounding eyes were cold.

“Where is the proof that it was my orders...!”

Siegcrest was unruffled and, with a calm action, took out a piece of paper from his breast pocket. Raising that high, he walked to the center of the room.

“Ghada caught a man who accepted the commission and, upon inspection, instructions came out. There is a signature at the very bottom. This sign is used by you whenever you’re issuing orders in the dark, in a manner of speaking it’s a “false name” or something like that.”

Indeed, there was an unfamiliar signature in the bottom right of the paper. It didn’t bear the slightest resemblance to the signature Roblin normally used for official documents and the like, but– the pallor of Roblin’s face as he stared at it intently became pale as they watched.

“I know nothing. I-I...”

He tried to deny all the more in a shrill and nervous voice.

–However.

In that moment the king, who had been completely silent up to now, quietly opened his mouth.

“Roblin.”

Having his name called, Roblin’s shoulders jerked awkwardly.

“Have you tried to murder a person without mercy, even while being someone who serves God? It seems like the God you believe in is completely different from the God we believe in, does it not?”

In that moment, the king’s blazing and glittering eyes were similar to a beast who cornered its prey.

“Regarding the future of the country, I shall undertake responsibility without needing your concerns.”

Roblin lost his expression more and more and began to shake violently.

“Until the end, I was not able to reconcile with you, hm. –It is a shame, Roblin.”

That one phrase was the last notice to him.

It told Roblin that his life as a priest ended here. Linus could tell that clearly.

Shortly thereafter, the meeting was dissolved and the participants left as they pleased with somewhat empty expressions.

Who would have imagined that the meeting would conclude in this form. It was as if they were already too exhausted to raise an objection or demand an explanation and the end of the meeting became anticlimactic. The matters related to Celiastina and Asyut remained undecided.

As everyone dispersed from the meeting room, Linus slowly looked back at the king.

“King Ronbarno, may I mumble to myself a little?”

“Hm?”

“...Even though I appear like this, I have been paying attention to Father Roblin’s movements these past few days. From his movements up to now, I have some doubts that he actually had the opportunity to attempt contact with members of the former anti-saint faction.”

“It may be that *someone* moved on behalf of those who seemed too busy.”

“*Someone*, huh. I see, that may have been the case.”

“Well, from the start, that man also had those intentions. It is the same even if the time period was a little out of order.”

“I wonder what happened to Yuna, who had assassins sent to her.”

“Asyut is with her. In that case, I’m certain everything is fine.”

The king smiled as if it was of no concern.

Was it because he trusted Asyut from the bottom of his heart? Or...

Linus opened his mouth to ask one more question but stopped.

–What exactly do you know and to what extent is it in your grasp?

Instead of saying anything, Linus sighed in his mind. In the end, this person was truly a terrifying man.

Chapter Eleven

It was late at night on the eighth day since he rushed out of the royal palace.

At last Asyut returned.

The front of the main gates was bright like daytime due to the large torch lights.

Asyut stopped his horse before the gates. Beside him– the carriage carrying the sleeping Yuna, who was dead to the world, came to a stop in the same way. From the window of the carriage the only thing that slightly peeked out from the girl whose body was wrapped in a linen blanket was her defenseless slumbering face. Those steady sounding breaths let him know that she was certainly alive. Peering at her face like that, Asyut gave a relieved sigh. No matter how many times he confirmed this, his anxieties still wouldn't disappear. She was right beside him but would she stop breathing before he knew it?– That was his anxiety.

Come to think of it, when Asyut just met “Yuna”, they returned to the royal palace with her on a horse like this. That was the beginning of everything. It was at that time that she just transferred to Celiastina's body. He was certain that she was at a loss inwardly, not knowing anything.

(This girl built up many things beginning from there.)

Now, it was time for Asyut to grit his teeth and bear with this. Yes– just a little more.

The gatekeepers were greatly flustered at Asyut's sudden return.

People came and went here and there in a panicked rush, and it was the same as that time one year ago. Everything was connected to the beginning–. Asyut got down from his horse and brought out Yuna from the carriage, carrying her carefully. His horse and baggage ended up being entrusted to the gatekeepers.

It was planned that he would meet with Yuna's parents at the royal palace after several days. Not knowing the treatment he'd receive at the royal palace, Asyut tried persuading them to wait at the town, but he was unable to get them to nod in the end. Rendo and Madela declared that, even if they were to be jailed, they would not leave Yuna's side.

Ghada, of the former anti-saint faction, was also to arrive later to the royal palace, bringing the assailants that were caught in the town of Svet. Asyut had thought Milifaire would be the only one not traveling with them, but in the end she planned to come together with them too. She didn't accept this, but she wanted to know the conclusion. That was what she said the night before he left Svet.

"Welcome back, Asyut."

In the bustle at the front of the main gates, a voice called out to stop Asyut who started walking.

It was Linus.

In general, he was a man who appeared in unexpected places and at unexpected moments, but it was rare for him to come and welcome Asyut on purpose like this. Unconsciously, Asyut tightened his arms around Yuna and turned to face him tensely. Linus acted as if he did not notice Asyut's actions and peered at the girl in his arms with deep interest.

"So, this girl is Yuna. Oh, what an adorably peaceful sleeping face."

"...Lord Linus, I have returned."

"Great work. I'm glad to see that you two are unharmed. There was some trouble with the priests who headed to the town on Father Roblin's orders, was there not?"

Asyut nodded at Linus' words.

"I was aided by Ghada and the others, sent by the king... Although, I cannot surmise the thoughts of the king."

"It's you, so I would guess you have a rough idea."

“What happened to Roblin.”

“As he plotted to assassinate the First Holy Knight and others using mercenaries, for the time being he has been dealt with on house arrest. Well, he also has status so it is unlikely he’ll be sentenced to death but, taking into consideration his behavior up to now, he will be imprisoned for a long time.”

“.....”

To what extent were Roblin’s crimes? Asyut didn’t know.

“The king’s actions were earlier than I expected. I didn’t think the situation would change to this point before Yuna was brought back.”

“He seems to have free time ever since Yuna was gone... that man.”

Linus showed a smile that could be taken as wry.

“–That king has summoned you. This is the critical moment, Asyut.”

†

In this royal palace, there were three rooms, large and small, as audience rooms.

There was a large hall that was used for major events of the country, and a corresponding medium hall. And then, on occasions of further personal-flavored meetings, the Savary Hall was used. Savary was the name of a goddess who appeared in the myths and, because her dancing figure was incorporated into the canopy of the throne, the name of the room was said to become that.

This Savary Hall was a small room that would be suffocating if fifty people were to be crowded in. Compared to the extravagant structure of the large and medium audience halls, this one was somewhat plain. It had impressively patterned wooden floors and tall walls based on the colors white and blue. The throne was established several steps above the floor and, from there, a crimson carpet was laid out like drawing a ripple. The candlestands set to both sides of the throne were of a simple design, without grand decorations. –Roughly, that was pretty much all that could be seen in this hall.

The current generation’s king, Ronbarno, often used this room by preference. It was

easy to clear people away and this room, where he could talk to the minimum amount of people, was just right for him who valued practicality. And, at the same time, it was convenient for Asyut right now as well.

“Excuse me.”

Asyut, who bowed at the entrance, looked up and confirmed the presence of King Ronbarno at the end of his sight. There was no one around— apart from one person, the helpless figure of a young girl lying down on a pedestal in front of the king. Asyut raised his gaze again after firmly ascertaining the safety of Yuna who was brought ahead of him. He was facing the king for the first time in a while and, like the last time he saw him, the king was completely unchanged from his extremely calm appearance.

“I appreciate your efforts, Asyut.”

When he looked at the king’s expression, who said that smiling, he couldn’t see anything but a good-natured old man thanking his relative for the long trip.

“Please do not be reserved, come closer.”

Asyut walked up to him as told and bowed his head deeply once again.

“It feels like it’s been quite a long time since I spoke with you. Lately, we have both been busy with various things, haven’t we.”

“Yes.”

“If I had spoken to you a little earlier, I would have heard many interesting plans, and that is a shame. The pleasure from hearing these things, after everything is concluded, is halved.”

“Even if Your Majesty hasn’t heard anything, you’ve seen through everything, have you not.”

The king’s voice was imbued with a faint amusement.

“That is not true. To think that, Asyut, you would throw everything onto me and take a rest in the countryside was unimaginable.”

“.....”

While saying such a thing, it was obvious that even that had been seen through, but Asyut did not dare to argue.

“Allow me one correction.”

Asyut raised his head and stared directly up at the king.

“What is it.”

“It was not a break. I went to complete a task.”

“A task, hm.”

The king finally showed an expression that was clearly a smile to anyone who saw. It was as if he could not help but be pleased, that was what was written on that face.

“It may not have been a task to be handed down to anyone else. However, to me, it was an enormous task that would have influence on my whole life.”

“And the fruit of that task was– is this girl, is that it.”

The king slowly narrowed his eyes and stroked his own beard. With a gentle smile, he looked at the girl who continued to sleep atop the pedestal.

“You found her at last, Asyut.”

“It is not over yet. It would also not be an exaggeration to say that this is the beginning from here.”

“In that case, do I still have an opportunity to worship a miracle and the likes from now?”

“If Your Majesty so desires.”

“That is quite an unpleasant manner of speech.”

The king showed a wry smile. It seemed that his mood was quite good.

“Even I do not intend to deny the existence of things such as God and miracles. Regarding the circumstances of the girl called Yuna, she is full of unknowns. Do you

not agree, Asyut? That is precisely why this world is interesting.”

Asyut looked up at the king with a serious gaze.

“...I heard that ever since she was struck by a carriage a year ago, she has continued to sleep without waking up even once. Whether it was an opportunity granted by God, or granted by another thing entirely, we may never understand forever. Only, surely to her, the year in this royal palace were like events in a dream. I wish to wake her up. I wish to make her dream a reality. I want to make such a miracle possible.”

Asyut told him that in an unwavering tone. He didn’t want to overlook the slightest movement of the king’s expression.

The aforementioned king seemed to miss those days he had with Yuna. In those gentle crinkled corners of his eyes, it was certainly felt that feelings of fondness existed inside him. However, at the same time, it was impossible not to notice the shrewd light that rested in those eyes.

–Did he not intend to permit Yuna’s awakening?

Asyut couldn’t read that.

“Incidentally, Asyut, how exactly are you going to wake this girl?”

The king very calmly asked this.

“...I will use Lady Celiastina’s ability, as a saint.”

“Oh? What sort of ability?”

“To lead those she has connected with to their deaths– that is what we had thought her ability was up to now.”

“That should be the case.”

“However, it became evident from her that, in actuality, she was endowed with a completely different ability.”

“Meaning?”

“Her actual ability is placed in the exact opposite direction. Her original ability is the amplification of power towards “life” for those she connects with.”

“Hmhm, and?”

“I heard that Lady Celiastina and the girl named Yuna were childhood friends from the time of the orphanage. They were not simply acquaintances, but extremely good friends. That is why, using the power she originally had as the saint, she is able to awaken the comatose Yuna. Lady Celiastina herself has said that this will surely be a success.”

“Hrm, I see. Indeed, this could be said to be a wonderful “miracle” if realized.”

The king gave a smile that was felt to have composure.

“I am deeply aware that Your Majesty has planned for the weakening of the saint’s and priest’s influence, but still, may I ask you to agree to her miracle here?”

“Hrmm.”

“In the story I heard from Linus just a while ago, Father Roblin was caught on charges of plotting my assassination during my absence from the royal palace. The priests must be greatly confused and in a disorder hereafter.”

“Roblin, you say.”

The king showed an ambiguous smile.

“For them, Father Roblin’s loss of standing should be an exceedingly great shock. Even if it was not, due to Lady Celiastina’s merciless actions over the past few years, the attitude towards religion has weakened. –Now that it has become this, on the contrary, I think it being too weak is also a problem.”

“In other words?”

“Is it not possible to say that it is not a good plan for the country to knock down the priests thoroughly here and now? At this rate, seen not only by people of the royal palace but also the country’s people is the king one-sidedly targeting the priests– I worry that it could be taken as you oppressing religion.”

“I see?”

“Religion is a large existence for the people of this country still. You’ve mostly succeeded in removing substantial authority from the priests, thus even if a miracle of the saint were to be shown to the people here it should not be a threat to you, the king. Rather, in cutting loose religion from the basis of their lives hereafter, I believe it is necessary to support it whenever there’s a chance.”

At that moment, when he talked on and on in one breath, the king gently placed his index finger on his own mouth.

“You’ve spoken a lot today, Asyut.”

Asyut’s words became stuck instantly at the king’s teasing words.

“I also understand your case. However, you see, I don’t particularly care.”

“...You don’t care, meaning...”

“I know only too well that what I am trying to establish will not be easy to do. If I am to centralize power, there is no way conflict can be avoided. Do you not think so, Asyut? Presently, we are standing at a crossroads of a large wave in this period. If you wish to choose to advance on a path with your own will, and not just be swept along, then you must be prepared to be accompanied by a great deal of sacrifice. The confrontation with the priests was one of those. I am well aware that evicting Roblin alone will not do anything. In the near future, religion will certainly come around and once again a large conflict will occur. I am prepared for the opposition from the people. You will not be able to accomplish anything if you are afraid of animosity being directed towards you.”

“I...”

The king’s words had an unquestionable persuasive power. In front of that, Asyut’s assertions and the like were, in the end, nothing but false arguments. Having this evident fact thrust at him painfully, he involuntarily felt like he was about to be overcome. However, Asyut himself could not draw back here.

“Certainly, I am aware it is as you say, Your Majesty. Only, is it not too premature to abandon religion entirely at this time. At the least, after creating a situation to obtain the understanding of the people...”

“Asyut.”

Asyut closed his mouth again when his name was called in a quiet voice. He looked up with eyes wavering with uneasiness at the king who showed no sign of being moved at all.

“How about we stop talking in circles?”

“...Your Majesty.”

“I wonder why you are so desperate. There is only one reason, is there not.”

And then once again the king dropped his gaze to the sleeping Yuna.

“You simply wish to save Yuna.”

His words pierced Asyut’s chest directly.

(That’s right.)

No matter what sort of pretentious statements were lined up.

(I just want to save her.)

That was it. That was all.

“In that case, you should have said those words only from the beginning.”

“-Yes.”

Asyut stared firmly at the king this time with a gaze full of determination. The king’s eyes, as he sat comfortably on the throne, crinkled slightly when he received that.

“I thought you had come to a resolution when you flew out of the royal palace on your own decision. The resolution that, for the sake of following through with your own will, you would pay whatever sacrifices there were, not caring even if that were to turn me into an enemy. And I am convinced from that now. That, as I thought, I was correct in placing you in the position of the First Holy Knight.”

Perhaps that was why he did not discard Asyut and, conversely, did something such as

lend his hand.

“Very well.”

Abruptly, the king said that.

“If you say you can wake Yuna then you may try it. I am sure I said previously that I had an interest in the fate of this girl called Yuna.”

Asyut slowly sucked in a breath.

“...Thank you very much.”

And then lowered his head deeply.

“However, if you are able to successfully wake up Yuna, what do you intend to do afterwards?”

There was a brief period of silence.

“–I intend to fulfill my duties as the First Holy Knight, unchanged.”

He had already decided that.

His words did not falter.

He could not quit being the First Holy Knight.

During his short stay in the town of Svet, Asyut had strengthened that will.

Those cheery residents of Svet, though shy of strangers, were truly warm and accommodating. They who loved their calm everyday life, where nothing overambitious happened, more than anyone else. And even those who understood the blessing of this ordinary life and perceived it as a “miracle”.

That was surely not just limited to the residents of Svet. No matter the city, or town,

or village, people were living in the same way. They create the world.

What Asyut wanted to protect was their “miracle” which spread out without any limits.

This “miracle” which could be said in other words to be a “hope”.

–He wanted to protect it, now and in the future.

That was exactly why.

“I wish to remain as the First Holy Knight in the future as well.”

“You’ve told me something interesting, Asyut.”

The king once again placed his index finger against his lips.

“It is a tradition that the saint and First Holy Knight must be married before twenty years of age or a disaster will occur, but that is simply nonsense without any basis.”

“...I see.”

“Oh my, you aren’t asking for more details. You aren’t curious as to whether my words just now are the truth or not?”

“Most likely it is the truth, is it not. When I look at Your Majesty’s face, I can tell.”

“I thought I was of the nature to not express things easily on my face though.”

The king played with his beard and made several faces.

“From the start, the marriage of the saint and First Holy Knight has no powers. It is nothing more than a custom that our distant ancestors began for the sake of making the foundation of the country stronger. By taking into the country the girls who held mysterious powers called saints, the king’s unifying force must have been raised. Furthermore, there is no need to discover the saint before the age of fourteen. Everything was made up for the convenience of the country.”

“Then the history where the saint was not actually found and the country was assaulted by natural disasters...?”

“History can be rewritten in any way, Asyut.”

The king smiled without an end, as usual, and Asyut wondered how serious he was. He wanted to doubt that everything might be the king’s lies, but– he was terrifyingly sane.

“In the dawning of the country, there was a need to borrow the divine power of the saints. I also know that well. However, it is different now. Without borrowing unknown powers and the influence of God, we can develop this country with human will and human power. –I will make such a country from now on.”

As the king’s smile deepened he looked down at Asyut with a piercing gaze.

“Let us make it together, Asyut.”

(–Even to this point.)

He wondered if everything was read by the king.

Beginning with the confinement of Celiastina to even the great loss of the priests led by Roblin.

Even Asyut rushing out of the palace, but returning to him in the end.

Everything was as he willed.

(Certainly, I am still standing in the palm of the king.)

He had noticed this a long time ago, but did not try to jump off from that palm personally.

However, Asyut was already different from the past him up to now.

It was no longer possible for him to be a convenient First Holy Knight for the king.

(I will go down the path I believe in. And I may choose a path that will be in conflict with you someday.)

Maybe even that was in his expectations? But he may have been convinced to raise Asyut even in that case.

(I am still lacking in power now, but down the road...)

He will surely acquire the power one day capable of protesting to this king.

And then, Asyut vowed, he would carry out his duties, not just in appearance, but as a true First Holy Knight.

Chapter Twelve

I wonder if the flower will bloom soon, Celiastina said.

Yeah! I hope it blooms soon. A little girl smiled and replied with that.

A harmless conversation exchanged around a small bud in the backyard of the orphanage. Even now Celiastina could remember it distinctly; the clear smile of the young girl at that time too.

Everything may have started from that moment.

Celiastina's extraordinarily steep journey began from a meagre but warm and sweet "memory of happiness". It may have been because the days following after that were so painful that those memories alone shone so vividly in the back of her eyelids.

Everything came quite far from such a place, Celiastina thought absently. And then, even though everything came from such a long distance, right now she was about to return to the "beginning" once again-.

Fate was such a strange thing.

Unexpectedly, a strong wind blew in from the window. Celiastina, who had been dozing beside the window with her eyes closed, was returned to herself at that instant. Her mind still a little hazy, she raised her body that was leaning against the back of the chair and looked outside of the tower from her small window.

The sunlight in the morning was gentle but still dazzling. Squinting her eyes, when she looked towards the royal palace, she could see officials coming and going from buildings in a rush in the morning. A single day to them was also beginning today.

(And a day for me as well.)

This may have been the first time she couldn't wait for a day to start this much.

Because she had always just endured time passing while suffering.

(Aah, but this year was different.)

The year that Yuna had spent in this royal palace in her stead were irreplaceable days to Celiastina, who had watched over her from right beside her. She cried with Yuna, she felt pain with Yuna, she confronted her own life with Yuna, and it was a short but long one year.

(Although the beginning was truly painful.)

Gazing outside the window, Celiastina let her thoughts run absently.

The strange sensation when she surrendered her body to Yuna still permeated her body even now. Though it should be her own body, there was a slow feeling as if it would not move as she wished. Inside a consciousness that was sluggish, like she just woke up from a dream, every day the things reflected in Yuna's eyes were reflected in her own eyes like that and the things that entered Yuna's ears entered her ears like that.

Yuna always did things with her utmost effort. No matter how unreasonable and unfair it was she never gave up. In the first place, after being hit by a carriage, being granted a life with a deadline as the substitute of the saint itself should have been an unjust matter beyond anything else to her. And yet, why was it that she did not break? Why was she able to work so very hard for the sake of another person's life?

Even as she asked that Celiastina felt like she already had the answer.

For that one year period she had passed that time closer to Yuna than anyone else. Celiastina personally knew best that Yuna didn't move in self-interest and loss and gains.

(But that was precisely why I was in pain.)

Celiastina closed her eyes once again.

(I felt like she had rudely stepped into my life. From the time we were young, I saw Yuna's straightforward smile but I thought it meant that she didn't know about the underside of society. I went ahead and thought there was no way she should understand...)

But Yuna understood it properly. On the contrary, she had even found Celiastina herself who Celiastina personally couldn't find. That Celiastina was able to confront

herself was surely because of that girl.

(Thank you, Yuna. And I'm sorry.)

The words she wanted to tell most to Yuna. And the words that hadn't come true yet.

If the two of them hadn't met at the orphanage that day, Yuna would have gone on a completely different life. At least, she wouldn't have been hit by a carriage and made into Celiastina's substitute. And what if Yuna didn't wake like this and stopped breathing— ah, such a thing would never be allowed. Celiastina closed her eyes and drew her brows together strongly. She had involved Yuna but she didn't want to steal Yuna's future as well.

(I will wake you for certain with my power.)

This determination, which had already been repeated countless times, was just now confirmed once more. The power to draw out the life force of those she connected with— she wondered why she couldn't have realized her own power earlier. If she had woken it properly during her time in the orphanage then maybe the future after that would have become completely different.

(I'm certain I used my power with Noie too.)

Noie. The beloved daughter of the former director of the orphanage. A young girl who fell down from a hill and lost her life. Was it not because Celiastina's powers tried to unconsciously save that girl that she lived for a while in a comatose state after the accident? In the end, she hadn't been saved but if Celiastina had engaged with her powers well perhaps she could have saved Noie.

(If only I understood this power.)

However, nothing would change no matter how much she regretted. Everything was nothing more than hindsight. And she also knew that, but...

(But how was I able to learn about the real power of a saint?)

Celiastina cracked open her closed eyes a little.

To begin with, she was not fully sure as to how her correct ability was woken. During the one year she was together with Yuna, she was certainly nestled close to Yuna's

soul. However, at the same time, she felt like her own soul was somewhere much farther away. A strange place where the spread of its space, the flow of time, and everything was indistinct– that was surely the place it began. That white world where Celiastina and Yuna faced each other for a brief moment.

And then didn't someone tell her?

How to use her own power. And that she was able to save Yuna.

(But who?)

No matter how she tried to remember, her mind did not work well as if there was a mist covering it. Even though inside the white world, a light– she remembered a brilliant light shining on her.

(But that is fine, even if I cannot remember. As long as this power is certain.)

And Celiastina had a strong confidence that it was certain. Right now, the warmth that was held in the depths of her heart was her binding with Yuna and her miraculous power as a saint.

“Celia, are your preparations in order?”

Abruptly, a voice called out from the other side of the door.

Celiastina breathed in lightly and then stood up.

“Yes, I'm ready– Linus.”

Receiving a response, Linus opened the door and walked up to Celiastina with his long robes fluttering. And then, finding her expression slightly stiff, the corners of his lips lifted a little.

“Oh my, is that an uncharacteristic nervousness? You?”

“Yes, that's right. That may be the case.”

Because today was a special day.

For Celiastina and surely for everyone else too.

From this moment, they were going to hold a ceremony to wake Yuna.

Celiastina's confinement by Roblin had already been lifted.

Because she was locked up by his own judgment in the end at the same time he lost his position Celiastina was once again allowed to be free. If she so wished, it was even possible for her to return to her own room in the royal palace but– in the end, Celiastina did not do that.

That is why, ever since she was brought to this tower in the first place, it was her first time leaving it.

And surely this would be the last time.

Asyut had brought Yuna to the royal palace, as he said he would. Therefore, this time it was Celiastina's turn to fulfill her promise.

For Celiastina right now, who could no longer share a consciousness with Yuna, the view she could see from the tower's window was everything of the world. Because of that, she didn't know how much trouble Asyut went through to bring Yuna to the royal palace, but she thought it wouldn't have been an ordinary effort.

(I have an obligation to respond to him.)

And it wasn't just to Asyut. She wished to tell everyone who Yuna had spent time with in this royal palace, and touched, for the past year that Yuna's existence was not a dream and that she had certainly been here.

She would get her back.

“Still, are you really agreeable to having this be a public ceremony?”

Linus asked that while stroking Celiastina’s windblown hair with his fingers.

“I believe it is fine for you not to bother exposing yourself personally to people’s eyes.”

“I want to do that, Linus.”

Celiastina shook her head slowly.

“I want to tell everyone everything.”

“You don’t need to hurt yourself any further than this.”

“I’m not hurting myself. I am “reclaiming” myself.”

Smiling, Celiastina stared at the scenery outside the window.

“I will live bearing sins that cannot be forgiven for the rest of my life. I am going to put myself together once more, confronting my sins. And even if it is accompanied with pain, it is not accompanied with despair. I think it is a step in order to move forward.”

She would reveal her entire life, without covering anything up.

Celiastina’s resolution had already been made.

The present Celiastina was made alive by Yuna.

Her once broken heart was healed and she now felt like she was reborn. However, it wasn’t that she was truly reborn. She could not compensate for her past mistakes with anything, much less act as if it did not happen. Everything was connected to her present self.

And that was why she first had to talk.

It wasn’t that she wanted anyone’s sympathy. It wasn’t that she wanted someone to accept her.

Only, she prayed that they would never again let a saint who would make mistakes like her appear.

Celiastina looked up at Linus who stood beside her.

Linus remained silent for a while, receiving her gaze, but then he dropped a kiss to the hair he was playing with in his hand and showed a faint smile.

Celiastina, brought by Linus, began to descend the stairs of the tower.

Every step she took gradually made her recall the atmosphere in the royal palace she passed time at. In this past year, the feelings at the time she was supported by Yuna and the sensations of that time were brought back in her before her eyes.

When she exited the tower, the breeze was calm and the air was brimming over with a kindness that enveloped everything.

Like that, she started walking straight forward without any hesitation.

It was said that Yuna was still sleeping in the divine service hall right now.

–However, before she went there.

There was not a single change before the balcony of the royal palace, which she was visiting for the first time in a long time.

It was a place she had been to a countless number of times. The Ceremony of Display; it was such a nostalgic sound. A ceremony where she showed a smile and waved her hand before many people who rushed in from the city. Celiastina had attended this ceremony many times as “herself personally”. For her it had been nothing but pain, however did Yuna look forward to it very much because it was the only place she could interact with the common people?

–To think that she would stand in this place again like this as Celiastina.

Celiastina looked around slightly before the entrance that connected to the balcony.

Waiting at the side, in addition to the high officials of the country, was Yodel, Linus, her bodyguards Aeneas and Neisan, and then Asyut...

Her gaze suddenly overlapped with Asyut's.

He kept his lips pressed tight and his expression didn't change. Only, he gave a small nod.

When her gaze moved to Linus after that, he looked at Celiastina with his usual smile. She drew in a breath. And then, breathing it out completely, Celiastina took a step again.

Onto the balcony.

What a beautiful sight could be seen from there.

She had an unbroken view of the blue sky that continued to the horizon. It was a sight that made her realize once again just how wide the sky was. When she dropped her eyes abruptly, the plaza below was packed with many people. The moment they noticed Celiastina's entry the noise up to then disappeared all at once and the only occasional sound that could be heard was someone swallowing.

Celiastina slowly checked the people in the place once more.

The people she had been together with in the royal palace were there. Nobles, knights, scholars, servants, cleaners, and everyone was crammed into that place. Every one of them was gathered here like this in order to hear Celiastina's words. Amongst them—ah, there was also the figure of the maid, Nasha, and Mislea of the infirmary. When was the last time she exchanged words with them? Nasha was looking up at her with a face that was about to burst into tears. Celiastina wanted to run to her side right now to hug her and thank her. Also, at the edges of the plaza the members of the former anti-saint faction were assembled. Her heart was filled with apologies to the complex feelings that were reflected on their expressions. In reality, the one to come to grips with them should have been her, not Yuna. The anger, sadness, and hate that swirled in their hearts would never melt and disappear, would it.

And she was able to find Yuna's parents who were leaning against each other.

Surprise and uneasiness painted their eyes, but even still they stared at Celiastina without averting their eyes. Celiastina was suddenly struck with an urge to cry. It was

like her heart had returned to the time she was Cella. To those young days where everything began.

“–Everyone, thank you very much for gathering.”

Celiastina began to talk in a voice that carried, as if shaking herself free from sentimentality.

The clinging gazes of the people became a single stake that strongly pinned Celiastina to that spot.

“There is a reason I have appeared before everyone like this for the first time in a long while. Today, I wished to tell everyone about everything and decided to stand here in this spot. I want you all to know everything about my life up to this point. I am not doing this because I wish for something from everyone. It is to put a division between my existence and the existence of a saint. That is what I want to talk to everyone about.

From the start, I was raised in an orphanage as a child with no relatives. It was a very normal and small orphanage. The people who took care of us orphans were all gentle and kind. Even if I did not know the affection of blood relatives, I remember we were treated well, to the extent where we were not sad.

Of course, at that time, the Holy Mark – the proof of a saint – was already engraved on my neck. Although it should have been there since I was born it seemed to have been overlooked for a while. However, the time when the Holy Mark was noticed came. The director of the orphanage was the first to notice it and from that day on he treated me like a special being. Right around that time, the director’s beloved daughter passed away in an accident and, perhaps because of those circumstances, the way he poured his affection towards me could already be called abnormal. I didn’t know how to thrust him away. I just thought that I should bear it and that way no one would be hurt. Surely, the director’s heart would also be saved. That is what I thought.

However, my heart was eroded little by little. I won’t say it was all because of the director. There were various other things that piled on top and, gradually, I became a timid and scared child. It was around that time... when a terrible phenomenon began to swoop down on my surroundings.

A friend I was close to suddenly died. The cause was a fall from the stairs. Before long,

yet another friend died. They fell into a pond and drowned. Even an orphanage teacher, who treated me specially, died around the same time. Her reason of death was... unknown to me. From that time on, my memories are all unclear, even if someone died by my side. Only the vague impression of precious people disappearing remains. However, I understood clearly only that it was my fault. I believe the others guessed the same thing. People suddenly disappeared from around me. The only person who remained by my side was the director.

It was a while after that when I was summoned to the royal palace. Other things happened but, in any case, I was brought to the royal palace. No, perhaps I was rescued. At the beginning, I didn't know how I should interact with people and passed days where I was only frightened, but still I think I gradually became accustomed to my surroundings.

However, the terrifying "curse" was not removed yet. In my surroundings, an important person, and then another, began to die. It seemed that everyone in the royal palace did not immediately notice as to why that happened, but I knew right away. At last, I understood it clearly. Everything was due to my ability as the saint. I- held the power to direct people I connected with towards "death".

I was driven to despair. I wondered just how many people died because of me? How much did their families and friends suffer? I didn't know what I was to do anymore. At the same time, I remember trembling in fear at the future of not trusting anyone and having to live the rest of my life alone. I- went completely mad.

From that time on, I began to hurt people by my own will and kill them. Whether I was insane or not, it was certainly by my will. I ordered it. By my orders, I harmed many people in the royal palace and it is impossible to escape from those sins for the rest of my life. Even if a person could be reborn, I am carrying sins deep enough to the point where they can not be forgiven, no matter how many generations I am reborn.

But, ultimately, I couldn't even live while remaining insane. No, even now I regret that I should have become like that much sooner.

One night, I wandered deep into the forest alone, and threw myself into a valley.

And there I should have certainly died. When I regained consciousness again, I stood alone in an unfamiliar white world. Realizing that, I remember I was relieved that everything was finally over. However- apparently, it seemed like I couldn't disappear

like that. A ball of light, with unknown origins, appeared and told me that as a saint I was not allowed to end my own life. That my body, which should have been dead, would have the soul of another girl enter in order to connect me to the thread of life. That was the soul of the girl called Yuna.

Yuna was my childhood friend from the time I lived at the orphanage. At that time, she was a very compassionate child, filled with warmth. She was a precious, precious friend to me. I was separated from her before this abominable ability killed her, but I thought that was good. Even so, after more than ten years had passed, in the end I also involved her. Yes, it was my ability in the end that made her soul transfer to my body. At the same time I threw my body into the valley, she was hit by a carriage in town and collapsed. It was not a coincidence. I unconsciously used my twisted power and tried to leave this world, dragging her with me. Her soul was “chosen”.

A period of one year was given. During this year, Yuna would live as the saint in my body. I became only a soul and watched her way of life with my own eyes, nestled close... And like that Yuna was forced to walk another person's life in another person's body, but she hadn't changed at all from the person I trusted when I was young. She always worked hard, was kind to everyone, and honest. That figure was dazzling. What it is to live, she taught me that with her own life. Many of you who have gathered at this balcony now are very familiar with the figure of the saint in this past year. That girl, Yuna, was the one that everyone saw and felt. Like many of you, whose hearts were touched, I also trembled at her beliefs and energy.

Yuna knew from the beginning that was she was just given one year. She accepted the fact that, once a year passed, she would be called to the heavens. No, of course, I felt her conflict in those days. Yuna suffered a lot. What was the meaning in running at full speed to the end of the road? Even though if she reached the end of it, there would be nothing any longer. But still, Yuna accepted her year of life together with her conflict. She was not only kind, but also a very strong person. My heart was saved by her figure.

The promised year has passed and I have returned like this... and Yuna has disappeared. I, personally, cannot find the value of me, and not her, remaining in this world. However, I will no longer take my own life again. I will confront my own sins and I wish to spend my remaining years devoting prayers to all those who I harmed with these hands. –On my twentieth birthday, which is soon to come, I will marry to God. I will not be together with the First Holy Knight, Lord Asyut. There is one more saint, much more suitable than me, to be close to him.

I apologize sincerely for this long story. But I wished for everyone to know everything. About what the being called a saint is, who the human called Celiastina is, and what the girl called Yuna brought about. I think this will be the last time I appear before everyone like this. I am sorry that from the beginning to the end I was unable to do anything saintly. I am thankful, from the bottom of my heart, for Lord Asyut who will continue to support everyone for the both of us.

I am a very weak- human being. I could not become a “saint”. Far from that, I even twisted the power bestowed to me by God and am nothing more than a foolish human. However, at this very last moment, I will believe in my own power and I wish to make a miracle happen. I mentioned earlier that my ability was the power which directed the people I connected with towards “death”. But, in truth, that is wrong. It was my weakness that caused that but, originally, I had the power to call forth wonderful miracles. The power to nurture the “life” of those I connected with- that is my true ability. With this power, I wish to call back Yuna, who is sleeping now in a far away place. Yuna saved me. That is why, this time, it is my turn to save her. Please, I beg for everyone to accept her when she returns. She is the person who should be blessed by God and by everyone from the bottom of their hearts.

-This has truly become long. Nonetheless, there must be many who cannot accept this no matter how much I talk. I am aware I will never be forgiven, but I sincerely apologize from the bottom of my heart for all the trouble I have caused. I wish for everyone and this country’s future to be shining. I will pray for this with the rest of my life.”

Chapter Thirteen

The door to the Hall of Blessings opened.

A tranquil air filled the room inside.

On the bed that was set up in front of the altar there were overflowing flower petals and a single girl.

The goddesses drawn on the ceiling watched over the girl while dancing elegantly.

Celiastina was already concentrating.

There was a sensation as if her entire body broke out in goosebumps. From the top of her head to the tips of her toes, and even her blinking eyelids, slightly opened mouth, and her fingertips which were lightly clenched, she felt a “power” surging up from her body.

She took one step forward. Her right foot that landed on the ground carried a gradual heat.

She took another step forward. Her left foot, that landed on the ground this time, was covered in the same heat.

It was like her back was pushed by something invisible. Her body was already moving to another place along with her will. There was a feeling of elevation that she could not suppress even if she tried to suppress and it shined, blazing, in Celiastina’s eyes.

–Yuna.

She was sleeping there.

Her soft cheeks held a faint redness and her chest moved slightly up and down.

It was a restful sleeping figure. However, her soul wasn't here.

–Yuna, come back.

Please.

Hear my voice.

Celiastina kneeled beside the bed and quietly clasped both of her hands.

She closed her eyes and prayed silently and strongly.

Inside her body, a storm blew roughly. A strong force that could not be controlled became a violent torrent and ran through her. That power tossed up Celiastina's soul with a terrifying force. It was so intense it was as if she was scattered and blown off from her body by an agitated wind.

Yuna. Yuna. Yuna.

Please, I beg of you, answer my voice–.

–Listen, Cella. Our time here is our little secret.

–Okay, it’s an absolute secret.

–Do you want to swap something to swear a promise?

–Swap?

–Yep. I’ll give you this ribbon. I really like it, but if you’ll take care of it...

–Thank you! Then I’ll, umm, give you this brooch. Take care of it.

–Mm, I’ll keep it in my treasure box.

–I’ll keep mine safe too.

I'll definitely treasure it...

"...-na."

It was a promise from a long time ago.

A promise that would never lose its vividness, but a very distant one.

"...-una."

I'm sorry for forgetting.

I'm sorry for not remembering.

I'm sorry for that long, long time, Cella.

"-Awaken, Yuna."

Her drowsiness was suddenly eliminated at the dignified and clear voice that seemed to echo directly in her head.

Yuna snapped her eyes open.

The world that leapt into view was a pure white space.

Where was this place?

What happened?

She—.

By the time Yuna noticed it, she was standing in this place.

She stood still in a daze, blinking her eyes many times.

She didn't understand anything. Her entire body was strangely sluggish and it was like her mind wasn't working.

Ah, what had she been doing?

She felt like a long, long time had passed.

But from what?

She couldn't remember well.

Yuna raised her right hand slowly with a heavy head that felt covered in a fog.

She closed her fingers and then opened them. As she repeated that several times, her mind began to accept this reality at last.

“This is...”

Yuna talked to herself and looked around the area.

A space with no up or down. It was an absolutely white world where she couldn't even find her shadow anywhere.

Yuna recognized this place.

“–the beginning.”

That mutter was the trigger.

All of Yuna’s memories overflowed from her head like a surging wave.

How she was hit by a carriage and lost consciousness. How she went into the body of Saint Celiastina and the days spent as a substitute. All the people she met and... left.

Yuna clenched her fist tightly.

She looked down at her own body. She had a simple appearance where she was just wearing a white one-piece dress. The golden hair that streamed down to her waist had disappeared and, instead, slightly wavy brown hair that reached Yuna’s shoulders swayed around her neck, matching her movements. Even the fist she was clenching tightly, and the right arm that followed that, was obviously different from the pale, almost translucent, skin that she had become familiar with in this past year. Her arm was undeniably a little tanned.

“It’s me...”

Even her murmured voice was very familiar to her ears and it certainly belonged to Yuna herself.

These sensations were nostalgic.

“I’ve returned.”

Yuna said out loud again, under her breath, while she touched her own face with both hands.

Unexpectedly, deep emotions did not arise. It might have been because it didn’t feel real yet. The fact that she had done all that needed to be done and was returned to the white world again hadn’t fit in yet. In the first place, she hadn’t thought the moment of regaining consciousness as Yuna again would come around after she returned Celiastina’s body to her. That was the case even though she was in this white world.

“You have awakened at last.”

At that moment.

Balls of light floated up from somewhere and began to drift around Yuna's surroundings, drawing a circle.

"This is..."

Yuna remembered immediately even while her eyes widened. At the beginning the same light shone on Yuna and led her to a new life.

The balls of light became one above Yuna's head and then split into several balls; they continued to repeat this and moved without haste. At times they would release a strong light, at other times they would become fine as if they would disappear. A mysterious voice fell down onto Yuna who was following those lights with her gaze.

"Yuna."

"Y-Yes?"

"Thank you for your hard work during that long time."

That one phrase stabbed sharply into her chest.

"...Everything is over, isn't it."

"Yes."

In that instant, the light seemed to sway kindly.

"Thank you very much. Owing to you, hope was indeed linked together. A small ripple born on the surface of the water has drawn a large circle that expands. In that way, the actions you took as Celiastina have created a breath of something new and connected it to what will happen next."

"Did I carry out my duty properly?"

"Yes, beyond what we wished for."

We.

–She wondered what exactly those lights, which said that, were.

Maybe they felt Yuna’s question, because the balls of light fluttered around lightly before gathering into one again and floated still directly in front of Yuna.

“We ought to convey everything properly, shouldn’t we. What we are.”

Yuna stared at the light in silence.

“We... are fragments of the souls of the beings called the past saints.”

“Huh?”

No way.

Yuna was instinctively speechless at that unexpected answer.

–Saints?

“Do you remember? You read documents related to us in the historical archive of the royal palace once before. Documents on us about how the Holy Mark was discovered when we were young and how we ended up walking on the path of a saint who knew nothing in the royal palace.”

That’s right, she definitely read those. She wished to know about the saints in more detail and made an unreasonable request to Asyut to be brought to the archive where classified documents were lined up.

She read about how the past saints lived up to now and how they suffered–. Their appearance written in those documents were shocking. Yuna learned that inside the life of the royal palace, which looked glamorous, they struggled in pain.

Were the shadows of the former selves of those girls this ball of light in front of her eyes right now?

“Everything stated in those documents are the facts. During our lifetimes, we did nothing but battle our own lives. We waited solely for the day we would be released from life. It was truly a long time and painful.”

“.....”

“That history did not change even with the birth of a new saint, called Celiastina. She also passed her days tasting the same pain we did. We, who are only fragments of souls that remain, sympathized with her emotions and felt that despair countless of times.”

Yuna stood in the place, unable to get any words out.

“We wished to save Celiastina’s soul. Every time a new saint was born, we wished for that same thing. However, all this time, there was nothing we could do. We did not know the method to save the wounded saints. –Apart from the ending of that life.”

However.

“Only this time was different. Perhaps Celiastina herself also strongly wished to be saved. Her unique ability as a saint, together with that thought, transformed that wish into an action. In other words, it dragged your existence in.”

“Me?”

“Yes. From childhood, you were a special existence to Celiastina. Due to that, you became the target of her distorted ability.”

What did that mean?

Yuna felt a chill run through her back.

She suddenly remembered Celiastina’s distorted ability. Amplifying the force towards “death” of those she connected with–.

–Aah, so that was how it was.

She understood everything at last.

“Celiastina’s ability was invoked in a twisted form but, ironically, we were able to find hope as well. That, if it was you, perhaps you could possibly save her.”

“And so you moved my soul into Celiastina’s body, right?”

“Correct. It was all we could do. The rest was how you would act. And what Celiastina, who was seeing that, would think. We could only watch over that.”

“That’s...”

A pretty high-handed way of doing things, isn’t it? A protest came to her throat but she managed to swallow that somehow. Looking back on it now, that might have been the best. For Celiastina– and for Yuna herself too.

In that one year, she experienced many things. She was able to meet people who she shouldn’t have been able to meet. And, above all, she was able to save Celiastina, who she couldn’t save when she was young, in the end.

(It’s much better than just being hit by a carriage and dying.)

Yes, she was able to think that honestly. It wasn’t only Celiastina who was saved.

But still, it stopped here.

She did everything she could. Everything was over.

She couldn’t say she had no regrets. There were many people she wanted to see so badly. A person she didn’t want to leave– a person she wanted to stay beside, always.

But there was nothing that could be done anymore.

Yuna bit her lip and looked down, troubled by the tears that were coming at this point.

Even though everything was over–.

“Now, Yuna, raise your head.”

The ball of light began to revolve around Yuna’s surroundings again.

“Because the road you walk has not ended yet. The road you believe in will become the road we believe in. Yuna, raise your head.”

The voice that fell down above her head gradually became more and more distant.

Yuna raised her head slowly. The road wasn't over yet? Those words...

"Thank you, Yuna. Please try walking once more. The road you believe in– a bright future."

"!"

Suddenly, the ball of light burst open. A brightness that Yuna had never experienced up to now covered her eyes. Instinctively, she blocked her face with her right arm and waited for the flash of light to settle. No words came out. She didn't know what in the world had happened.

It was likely that was for a short moment.

A pure white world.

Before she knew it, the light disappeared.

Instead, in front of Yuna far, far away was the small shadow of a human.

(That's...)

Yuna gazed at that silhouette in a daze. Little by little, an emotion deep in her chest began to surge up greatly in bits and pieces. Was that possibly...

(Could it be...)

Next thing she knew, Yuna was running. She kicked off the white ground. Like the first time she came to this place, she ran towards that same human shape.

That was... that shape was...

"–Celiastina!"

When she shouted the human shape, which stood there, turned to her. It was the appearance of a woman she had grown used to seeing in this past year; golden hair that flowed down like silk and distinct facial features. She was like a doll, however there was certainly a will resting in those eyes that took in Yuna's figure.

"Celiastina, Cella!"

She called out that name over and over again, along with a bouncing breath, because she thought that Celiastina would disappear if she didn't do that. But Celiastina did not disappear. She simply waited in silence until Yuna came in front of her.

And now, at last, the two met.

"Cella."

"...Yuna."

Celiastina also called out Yuna's name. The fact that the two of them were facing each other like this was in and of itself like a dream. No, it might be a dream. But she didn't care even if that was the case.

"...It's really you, Celiastina, right?"

Celiastina blinked at Yuna's question.

"Yes."

She couldn't believe it. Yuna felt sobs mix in with the breath she sucked in as hard as she could.

"...You're still here. I thought you already returned back to your body."

She cast a smile at Celiastina with a heart that felt like it was going to be crushed by emotions.

"No, indeed, I returned to my original body. Because of you I was able to return, once again as Celiastina, and I began to walk anew... However, I came here again at the end. In order to see you."

"Me?"

"Yes."

And then Celiastina suddenly looked like she was about to cry.

"I have always been by your side in this past year. Together with your feelings. But, at last, we can exchange words like this."

“...You were beside me all this time.”

“I was watching you at all times. But I couldn’t help but hate that at the beginning. I even wanted my soul to disappear all the more.”

Celiastina continued to speak carefully, as if she were reflecting upon her own words.

“And then you lived the life I threw out with all that you had. The life that I personally tore to pieces, scattered, and abandoned. You carefully picked up those pieces one by one.”

“I’m sorry. I did a lot of selfish things, didn’t I.”

Celiastina shook her head loosely. And then she quietly opened her right hand which had been clenched. There, in that hand, was the ribbon that connected the two.

“I’m the one who must apologize. I clung to the memories of my childhood forever and, because of that, I involved your entire life. I’m so sorry, truly.”

Yuna raised her gaze, which had dropped to the ribbon, and looked once more at Celiastina.

“You’ve kept this ribbon, huh. Thank you. And thank you for letting me spend this one year as Celiastina. Thank you for coming to see me now like this too. –Hey, Celiastina, I have so much feelings of gratitude. So, please don’t apologize.”

“Why are you so good-natured?”

Celiastina’s expression crumpled again.

“But, seeing you like that, made me think to try facing forward once more. Even though I didn’t want to raise my head ever again, where things were only painful and there was only despair in front and behind me. I was saved by you and, above all, this heart was saved by you. You lifted up my heart which simply wanted to sink together with despair... Thank you.”

Yuna nodded from the bottom of her heart. She truly thought that it was good to hear those words from Celiastina.

Like how Celiastina felt supported by Yuna, it may have been Celiastina’s existence

that supported Yuna. For the sake of Celiastina who would return some day. Yuna managed to overcome the hardships that stood in her way, chanting that over and over again like a spell.

“Now, hurry and go back. Linus is waiting too.”

When Yuna said that unexpectedly, Celiastina blinked her eyes.

“Because he told me that he’d always be waiting for you, Celiastina. And I’m sure you’ll get along well with everyone else. With Kazlow, from the orphanage, and the children too. Even Asyut, with the two of you like this now, I believe you’ll surely understand each other. Certainly, there might be a lot of painful and hurtful things but more things than that will overflow into your life, Celiastina. So, this time, even if it’s slow, try walking.”

“Yuna.”

Celiastina made a teary smile.

“Thank you.”

And then she stretched out her slender arms. She embraced Yuna, as if clinging to her. Yuna was surprised but, right after that, she felt the tears she had managed to hold back until now trail down her cheeks.

–Aah.

Was she sad or was she happy? Was she scared or was she relieved?

Waves of emotions overwhelmed her intensely.

“But, you know, Yuna, you’re mistaken on one thing.”

“Huh?”

“It’s not only me. There will surely be a lot of wonderful things waiting for you in the same way in your life.”

She heard Celiastina’s voice which was similarly wet with tears.

She didn't have the time to think about what Celiastina meant.

“-This time, it's my turn to save you.”

Please, wake up Yuna.

In an instant, Celiastina's voice became distant.

Even the warmth in Yuna's arms, the sensation of Celiastina's arms around her back, and everything scattered in an instant. It felt like she was dragged by a tremendous force to somewhere and she couldn't even raise her voice even though she wanted to scream.

What in the world was happening?

She meant to struggle frantically, but in the end she wasn't sure if she even did that.

Wake up-.

She felt like she heard Celiastina's voice from somewhere far, far away.

Chapter Fourteen

“Lady Celiastina!”

A voice that seemed to pierce the ears echoed in the room.

Yuna heard that for certain.

“What in the world happened?”

“Oh my goodness, she’s collapsed.”

“Lady Celiastina, please hold on.”

Several shouts rained down in a bundle.

Yuna realized they were all familiar voices, but it was as if she couldn’t move her body. Her body was heavy like it was hardened in wax.

Her head hurt.

Her throat was dry and she couldn’t speak.

“...There’s no need to be concerned, it appears that she only lost consciousness.”

“But what happened?”

“I don’t know. In any case, we can only let her rest in a separate room and watch her condition.”

“For caution’s sake, let us call a doctor. Neisan, I’m entrusting this to you.”

“Understood.”

The air in the room shook with uneasiness. Yuna felt that acutely against her skin.

She had to... open her eyes.

She had to wake up—!

“—!”

Putting in all her might, Yuna cracked her eyes open.

Her body was finally beginning to comply to her will. She blinked her leaden eyelids a few times and the world became clearer frustratingly slow. The first thing reflected in her eyes was the room’s ceiling. It was a brightly colored high ceiling where goddesses danced and it made her remember nostalgic sensations from somewhere.

Following that, Yuna tried to look around her surroundings but it was like her body wouldn’t listen to that at all. Meanwhile, there was the presence of several people right beside her. What caught her attention was the name they called— Celiastina. Was she right beside Yuna right now? And she lost consciousness?

“...na.”

She tried to call Celiastina’s name in a voice that was barely a voice.

“Cel... as... na.”

Little by little, a sound began to leak from her throat to mix in the air. However, the pace was maddening. What exactly happened to her own body?

“Celas... tina.”

Still, on her third try, she managed to call out that name.

There was no response from Celiastina. But, instead, someone else seemed to have noticed Yuna's awakening.

"D-Dear. Dear! Yuna is...!"

It was the voice of her mother, Madela. Yuna could tell that immediately.

—Aah, her mother was right beside her!

Struck by that thought, Yuna moved her body with all her might and turned her head in the direction of the voice, though it was an awkward movement. She also managed to focus her awareness and blinked many times. Eventually, her focus came together and as soon as she found the unmistakable sight of her mother in her vision Yuna was about to cry again. However, currently, she also couldn't make tears.

"Yuna!"

Her father, Rendo, bounded over to her side like a shot.

"Da... d. Mom."

"Oh Lord, to think it's real! You've really woken up—"

Madela buried her face in Yuna's shoulder and cried. Rendo grabbed Yuna's right hand and clenched his teeth, as if to hold back his tears.

Looking at their appearance, Yuna began to understand what happened to her own body at last.

"This time, it's my turn to save you."

Celiastina's words which she last heard in that white world. It was obvious that she saved Yuna. She didn't know where this place was, but it was neither heaven nor that white world; it was the real world.

—Yuna woke up.

“I’ve... return... ed. Celiastina... saved... me.”

“Yes, that’s right. The Lady Saint’s prayers saved you. I really can’t believe it. I’ve had this dream night after night; the dream that you would wake up like this. But this time it’s real, right?”

Madela raised a face which was drenched with tears and whispered that. Yuna nodded clearly. —It wasn’t a dream, it wasn’t a dream.

“Celiastina...?”

“Don’t worry, using her powers might have been a burden on her body and she only lost consciousness.”

It was a calm voice, as deep as the sea. Past the shoulders of her parents she saw the figure of Linus. Why was he together with her parents? Yuna nodded quietly while thinking this to be strange. If Celiastina was also safe then she was relieved.

“Lord Asyut, my daughter has really woken up. I can’t believe it and it’s like a dream. Aah, thank you so much. Thank you so, so much for saving my daughter, truly.”

Madela, who was clinging onto Yuna, finally raised her upper body and cast her words behind her.

Yuna heard that and her body, which was still stiff, shook clumsily.

(Asyut?)

She couldn’t believe the name she heard from her mother’s mouth.

It couldn’t be that even Asyut was in this place?

Yuna nervously – though even if she rushed she couldn’t go any faster than that – moved her head and explored the room with her gaze.

When she looked closely, in addition to Linus, there was Siecrest, Aeneas, and even

Yodel and Nasha were looking over here. No one had changed. And then— ah, Asyut was certainly standing right beside her.

Asyut bent his knees beside Yuna, looking as if he was seeing something dazzling. Madela and Rendo slid their bodies over slightly to create space for him.

“—I’m glad.”

Asyut murmured lowly like a sigh.

“I’m so glad you woke up.”

And then he closed his eyes quietly and tilted his head down just a little.

Yuna still couldn’t believe it. Asyut was facing her like this, no one else but Yuna herself. Right now, the one reflected in his eyes was unmistakably Yuna. It wasn’t Celiastina, but Yuna.

Yuna stared solely at Asyut while trembling with joy.

No words came out.

And then—.

For the first time, Yuna saw Asyut shed tears.

†

For several days after that, Yuna repeatedly slept and woke like a baby.

The condition of her body, which could barely move or speak initially, became markedly better each time she woke up. It was a sensation like she was gradually taking off heavy armor. Considering that she had slept for a year but that it seemed like her muscles weren’t especially emaciated, she once again felt the power of the saint’s miracle was hard to believe.

Although Celiastina herself also woke up for a moment after using her powers she was like Yuna and seemed to sleep and wake repeatedly. Oftenly, when Yuna was awake Celiastina was sleeping and when Celiastina was awake Yuna was sleeping. Because of that, Yuna had yet to thank Celiastina directly.

It was said that on that day Celiastina had kneeled in front of the sleeping Yuna and did nothing but offer prayers without moving. It was like she didn't hear those around her suggest taking a small break and she didn't move like that for nearly half a day.

In addition, it seemed that Asyut also watched over the two of them by Celiastina's side. What a blessing it must be to have the country's First Holy Knight and Lady Saint pray to that extent. Her father, Rendo, said that over and over again and her mother, Madela, smiled widely beside him.

Like that, today was the fifth day since she woke up.

Finally, Yuna broke out of the state of constantly battling sleepiness, got out of bed, and recovered to the degree where it wasn't a problem to walk around her room for a little bit. And then, at this time, it seemed that nostalgic faces gradually came to visit Yuna.

The first who showed their faces were Aeneas and Neisan together.

For Yuna, who was in a situation where she was generally asleep all the time, it was embarrassing in various ways for men around her age to visit her out of concern, but when she saw both their faces that thought was blown out of her mind in an instant.

Yuna knew that her present self was the same as a stranger to them. But still, she wasn't able to suppress the joy that welled up. When she called the names of these two nostalgic men in a teary voice, Aeneas in particular crumbled to his knees on the spot. "I thought I wouldn't ever see you again" he said and his voice trembled horribly. Aeneas stifled his sobs like that for a long time, unable to raise his lowered head. Neisan patted his back but abruptly turned to face Yuna and said "I finally managed to meet you" along with a smile.

Following that, the next ones to come were Nasha and Mislea.

At the beginning, when Nasha entered the room, she had a deeply pensive expression but that suddenly twisted hard and large drops of tears began to fall from both eyes. And then she ran to Yuna like that and hugged her.

Yuna was startled for a moment but then something burst in her chest right after. When she squeezed Nasha back tightly, she felt Nasha's feelings convey themselves to

her painfully. Nasha, she called out that name and hugged her harder and harder. And then the two of them cried their eyes out. Like children, they cried and cried and cried. Mislee simply remained quiet and comforted the two of them. When she noticed the sensation of someone gently stroking her back, Yuna cried even more.

Some time after that Siegcrest also came.

Even at this time, his carefree and easygoing attitude was unchanged. And then he said straight out “You’re the exact image of the Celia I know” when no one else had touched on her appearance. His carefreeness was extremely comfortable to Yuna.

For a period he rambled on about things of little concern up to now and then, at the end, muttered meaningfully “Asyut still hasn’t come, has he. That guy’s an idiot, really” before leaving the room.

Yes, Asyut hadn’t visited Yuna once.

Yuna didn’t know as to why that was. Asyut looked to be happy at the time she woke up, but maybe now that it was like this he was confused over Yuna who was so different from the Celiastina he knew and so he was avoiding her. She didn’t think he was a person who judged others by their appearances. However, the current Yuna – and even her inside – felt different from who she had been in the past year.

(Because I thought I only had one year left, there was definitely the feeling of needing to do my best.)

Conversely, because she was already basically dead, she was able to give everything she had at everything and really get into things. But, right now, it felt like that spirit was suddenly gone from her. The her in this past year, while it was her, was also still not her in the end. Yuna was aware of that herself and so personally she was also a little afraid to meet Asyut.

She wanted to go and see Asyut right now. But she was scared.

These complicated feelings swirled inside Yuna.

Several more days passed.

Today as well Yuna was in her bed in the room given to her by the royal palace. From there, she gazed absently at the scenery of dusk outside.

Her body was wholly well. It was likely she wouldn't have any difficulties in returning to a daily life at all anymore. And yet she was passing the time sleeping and waking like this—

(I'm not being honest.)

She wanted to stay like this. Just a little more.

Yuna's parents were also similarly lodging in a separate room, borrowed from the royal palace. It was supposed to be until Yuna's health was a little more stabilized, but they probably wanted to return home quickly. During their stay in the royal palace, it seemed like they were helping out in Mislea's infirmary. According to Nasha, her parents' knowledge of herbs was useful even in the royal palace.

Each time they came to see Yuna, in their frequent visits, she felt joy but she also couldn't help but feel the same level of guilt. These days they looked tired somewhere. For her parents, who were commoners through and through, their lives in the royal palace must have been nothing but stifling. Yuna knew that sensation well, because she herself felt that same suffocation when she started to live in the royal palace at the beginning. —Although now she was completely used to the air of the royal palace.

(But I can't pretend like this forever.)

This royal palace life couldn't continue on much longer.

Before long, Yuna would leave the royal palace and return to her "everyday" life. Once that happened, she would never again visit the royal palace.

As she was thinking over that at length, the door to the room was knocked on.

"Yuna, I'm coming in."

The voice of her mother, Madela, was heard through the door.

"I tried baking a cake. Do you feel like eating?"

Yuna's face brightened in a flash at the sight of her mother opening the door safely and entering with a tray in one hand.

"Wow, it smells great! Of course I can eat it, thank you!"

"I'm worried over whether I baked it well since it's different from the stove at home."

In the tray placed on top of the table was a freshly baked fruit tart. It was a favorite of Yuna's from a young age.

"Can you get up?"

"Mhm, it's okay. I'm all better already."

You really are, aren't you. Lady Celiastina's miracle is an amazing thing."

Madela sat down beside Yuna, who slipped out from bed to sit in a chair, and stroked her hair tenderly.

"That's true. I think so too."

"You need to say your thanks to Lady Celiastina and Lord Asyut. They haven't visited this room, have they?"

"...Yeah."

Yuna gave a small nod. Celiastina and Asyut; they were both in the same royal palace but she hadn't met them yet.

(Even though they're right there.)

Because Celiastina's health wasn't perfect like Yuna, she didn't think Celiastina would come and so that couldn't be helped. But what about Asyut? Even though she knew it was selfish of her, there was a part of her that was expecting him to come visit her out of concern.

"Yuna, what's wrong?"

"Huh?"

When Yuna brought back her drifting consciousness, Madela was peering at her in concern.

“You look like you’re in pain somewhere. Do you feel sick?”

“N-No, sorry, I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

Yuna shook her head in a hurry and to gloss things over she carried a piece of Madela’s homemade cake to her mouth. It was a hot, very sweet, and nostalgic flavor. A warmth gradually soaked into her body.

“That’s good then, but if you feel even a little strange please call someone immediately, okay? I’m asking you.”

“Yes, I’ll take care.”

“Then I’m going to help Mislee in the infirmary. I’ll come to see you again.”

“Okay.”

When Yuna nodded while moving her fork to her mouth, Madela finally smiled with relief and left the room.

Yuna turned her eyes to look outside the window while she listened to the footsteps of her mother grow distant. This room, which wasn’t that far from Celiastina’s room, had a view that wasn’t changed much from before.

(The flower garden is pretty.)

Was it possible that Celiastina was also looking at the same scenery right now?

“Yuna, may I intrude?”

In that moment, there was a visitor to her room with a timing like they swapped out with her mother, Madela. It was Linus.

“Ah, yes, please come in.”

When she thought about it, she hadn’t seen him since that time she woke up. Letters inquiring about her condition had been dropped several times though, so she didn’t

feel like it had been a while... It wasn't because she was only thinking about Asyut... is what she thought.

"Mm, there's a nice smell."

"Ah, sorry for being in the middle of eating."

"No, don't mind that. I'm the one who came to visit abruptly."

Linus stopped Yuna, who stood up, with a hand and then seated himself opposite of her.

"I'm glad you seem to be healthy beyond expectations. You have more than enough of an appetite as well."

Yuna turned bright red at Linus' wide smile.

"I apologize for not coming by to see you. A lot of work about Celiastina piled up, you see. But I did think that I should see you as soon as possible."

"About Celiastina...?"

Yes, Linus nodded without a break in his calm expression.

"Um, did something happen to Celiastina? Is her health..."

"There are no problems with respect to her condition, so do not worry. It's not that, but various things related to dealing with her future. Celia is to live in the Priest Tower henceforth. I say to live but, in actuality, she's already been doing that for quite some time."

"Huh? Celiastina isn't in her own room in the royal palace right now?"

"No, currently her room is the uppermost floor of the Priest Tower. A sacred place closest to God."

The Priest Tower. Yuna also knew that place for what it was. It was also a place where she once confronted the priestess, Yodel. It was protected firmly by the priests and a terribly closed place, as if others were not allowed near—.

“Why is Celiastina there?”

“Because she desired that. Celia intends to spend her future life secluded in the tower and praying to God.”

“What do you mean s-secluded!?”

Yuna shot up from her chair with a force that knocked it over.

“She won’t be able to come out of there anymore? She won’t see everyone either? She’s going to spend the rest of her life just praying to God?”

“...Yes, you’re right. Exactly that. Celiastina is thinking that this is all the atonement a saint dyed in sins can do.”

Linus, who also stood up, placed his right hand on Yuna’s shoulder and spoke each word slowly as if to calm her. His warmth, which was transmitted from the palm of his hand, managed to soothe Yuna’s heart. But still, she couldn’t accept that at all.

“You won’t be able to see her anymore either, Linus?”

“I am her guardian, so I will have chances to see her from here on as well.”

“...And Asyut?”

Linus clasped his hands together loosely.

“Celia and Asyut’s engagement was officially broken off just a few days ago. Celia plans to become a bride of God on her twentieth birthday, which is coming soon. With that, she won’t be coming out of the Priest Tower in the future.”

—That was...

“For the marriage with Asyut to be cancelled... Then, Asyut won’t be the First Holy Knight anymore?”

“No, that isn’t the case since the duties of the First Holy Knight isn’t just to be the marriage partner of the saint. According to the announcement of the king’s aides, it seems Asyut will continue to serve the country in the future with no changes. Well, that being said, it may be a situation that is still unknown in the future.”

No way.

This time Yuna wasn't able to raise her lowered head.

She had thought that everyone had gradually seen the light of hope, raised their head to accept that light, and faced forward and began to walk in their own way.

Why was God still bestowing a trial on them?

"Yuna, there is no need to pity Celia. Because she hasn't thrown out her life in the future."

"But."

It took all Yuna had to suppress the emotions that seemed like they would run rampant again.

"If she was atoning for the mistakes she committed there should be other ways of doing that, right? She could run around to many places, raise her voice, and work hard to make a world where another saint like her will never appear again, or something."

"That's true. That is also one road."

"I want her to laugh more, cry more, and do more things from here. I want her to live to the best of her ability."

"Mhm."

She knew that she was pushing her own thoughts too much onto Celiastina. Celiastina had committed unforgivable sins. It would be difficult for her to obtain happiness as a normal woman in the future.

But still, even if her mind understood her heart couldn't accept it. Because she had spent the past year, closer than anyone else, together with Celiastina.

She wanted Celiastina to be happy.

"You really are a gentle girl, Yuna."

Linus seemed to guess everything that Yuna was trying to say.

“Certainly, there are countless of choices. However, this is what Celiastina herself has chosen. I think that surely this is the best choice for that girl.”

“But! Celiastina’s been hurting all this time. So, from here, I think she should experience happy and fun things even while atoning for her sins.”

“I believe she already has salvation in herself.”

Linus looked directly at Yuna.

“Celia had a very bright and refreshed face. She’s already freed from the darkness of her heart. I think what Celia has been searching for all this time, more than anything else, was that ‘salvation’. An irreplaceable ‘salvation’ over any kind of happiness or enjoyment.”

“.....”

“Please, I’d like you to understand. That Celia is certainly happy right now.”

Celiastina’s salvation was already inside her. She was certainly happy—.

Faintly, she felt like she understood what Linus meant. And that a conventional happiness decided by other people wasn’t “happiness”.

But.

But still.

“Linus, I can’t agree with this in the end. —I’m going to see Celiastina!”

“Yuna!”

She wanted to hear the words of Celiastina herself.

Yuna shook off Linus’ restraint and rushed out of the room.

She ran desperately through a long corridor.

It was probably because she was moving her body for the first time in a while that she tripped over her legs and couldn't run well, but she didn't feel that out of breath. She remembered the path to the tower clearly. This was a place where she spent her past year.

There were many servants who turned to look at the running Yuna with a surprised expression, but no one reproved her. There were few people who were familiar with Yuna's own appearance. It helped that the sleep-wear she wore was close to simple clothes and she must have been judged to be a servant or something.

She went outside the building while losing her breath.

The sky was dyed bright red and it was almost ominous. Please, don't let the sun set. For some reason, Yuna frantically thought that. If the sun set and night came then she felt like she could never bring back Celiastina again.

The tall Priest Tower approached before her eyes.

There was no sign of life in the surroundings. It felt like this area was all the more quieter than the time she visited this place before. It was like something had fallen out and it was somewhat gloomy and sad.

She sprang to the door of the tower. The solid door, which was locked, did not allow Yuna's entry stubbornly. She tried pounding on the door violently, but there was absolutely no response from inside.

"Celiastina."

Mumbling that weakly, Yuna took several steps back and looked up to the tip of the tower, which was tinged with a red shadow, uncaring of the pain in her neck.

"Why, why, Celiastina."

Let's live together. Even if everyone in the world says they won't forgive you, I want to live with you. Laughing, crying, I want to live like that in the same way, even if the place we live in is different.

"Cella..."

The tears that appeared did not fall.

Because there was something that skimmed Yuna's cheeks before her tears.

Noticing that, Yuna's eyes widened. Fluttering down from the sky were several—petals.

“This is...”

Yuna picked up the petals fallen on the ground in a sluggish motion.

They were small, pale pink petals.

Asiatic jasmine flowers.

“!”

Yuna raised her head again. She stared hard at the top of the tower, but she couldn't see the figure of a person. The petals fluttering down had already stopped.

But the petals in her hand hadn't disappeared.

“—!”

Why.

Celiastina's emotions, strong to the point of pain, were suddenly sent directly into Yuna's chest.

I'm really, really happy. So happy that I don't need anything else anymore—.

She felt like she heard Celiastina's voice.

In the back of her eyelids she could see Celiastina's figure with a gentle smile that seemed to surround her.

(Celiastina.)

Yuna called out her name. And she also heard the voice that responded.

—Yuna.

I'm listening, I hear you, Celiastina.

Yuna.

Yuna, thank you for all you've done for me.

But salvation is already inside me.

You gifted me an irreplaceable salvation over any kind of happiness or enjoyment—.

That's why I'm already happy.

I'm happy, Yuna.

Linus' words changed into Celiastina's words.

Yuna continued to look up desperately at the tower.

(Celiastina.)

She gripped the petals hard.

Celiastina's warmth gradually spread through the petals to both of Yuna's hands.

(I was saved in the same way.)

So that the gentle breeze wouldn't sweep away the petals she closed her fingers tightly.

(That's why, from here on, I'm going to face forward and walk too.)

Celiastina, watch me.

Because I'm going to live my life to the fullest too.

For certain.

†

Yuna, who stood still in that spot until the sun completely set, noticed that the wind was starting to turn cold and finally began to head to her room in the royal palace. Before she knew it, her body had become completely chilled. Only the hand that was gripping the flower petals retained warmth.

Her heart was still a mess. She definitely heard Celiastina's voice and her own voice, which reached Celiastina like a shout, echoed again and again in her heart. It was like something was overflowing and it took all she had to keep it in her chest. As she walked towards her room with an unsteady gait, it was mostly an unconscious act.

In a courtyard on her way back, Yuna discovered a shadow waiting for her.

"Asyut."

When his name was called, that handsome profile, with his back leaned against a lamppost, turned her way.

It had been a really long time since she said Asyut's name. And this voice certainly reached him.

Somehow that fact didn't seem to be a real thing.

Just about everything felt indistinct and unsteady. How much of this was real? How much of it a dream?

"I heard from Lord Linus that you headed to the Priest Tower."

"I see. And so you came to see me? I'm sorry, I'm always doing whatever I want."

Strangely enough, even though she felt a sensation like she was floating, Yuna

answered calmly.

Aah— but, in the end, Asyut came for her like this, huh.

At any time. Even if her appearance changed.

“How is your health?”

“I’m okay now. Thank you.”

“During the time you were resting in your room, I thought to go and see you.”

“But you were busy, right? I understand so don’t worry about it.”

In truth, she had been really sad but she said that understanding line instead.

“Certainly— this country is changing greatly, at this very moment. There were various things I had to do before I saw you.”

“That’s right, huh. Since you’re the First Holy Knight of the country, Asyut.”

Asyut showed an ambiguous smile, but she could tell that even in this darkness. And then he slowly walked over to her. When he stood equal to her, Yuna noticed that he was taller than she thought and felt extremely nervous. Ah, that’s right, it was because her current self was a little smaller than when she was Celiastina and so the difference between Asyut had expanded.

“Were you able to meet with Lady Celiastina?”

“...No, I couldn’t. But.”

Yuna quietly held out the asiatic jasmine petals, which were held in the palm of her hand, to Asyut.

“Celiastina’s feelings were sent to me properly. It made me think that I also have to face forward and do my best in the future.”

She would leave the royal palace and walk her life as Yuna.

Though with Asyut— she would have to leave him.

“Yuna.”

Yuna’s shoulders trembled when her name was called without warning.

“May we speak a little more like this?”

Asyut’s eyes, which were lit by the lamp, stood out against the dark night where the sun had completely set. Even though they were the same black color, she felt like there was a deep glimmer in the black he had.

“Ah, sure, then why don’t we sit and talk?”

The two sat down like that on the bench in the courtyard. Yuna shivered faintly at the cool sensation of the stone. Come to think of it, she had rushed out in her sleep-wear.

Asyut draped the cloak he held in his hands over Yuna’s shoulders. He must have gone out of his way to bring this so that Yuna’s body wouldn’t get cold. The moment she was surrounded by that warmth, her heart was warmed as if a fire was lit. And yet, at the same time there was a pain as if she was being squeezed tightly.

“...Um, Asyut, thank you very much for everything this time.”

Once again, Yuna mumbled this hesitantly.

“Please, you do not have to speak so politely. Be the same as you were before.”

“R-Right. That’s right, sorry. It’s just, if you think about it, I’m no longer Celiastina so I was wondering if it was really alright.”

“Your appearance or name doesn’t matter.”

“...Mm.”

Asyut was kind. Right now, Yuna hadn’t lost just her appearance and name but also many other things. She shouldn’t have the qualifications anymore for him to talk to her in a gentle voice like this.

“That reminds me, I heard about all the things that happened while I was sleeping from everyone.”

Yuna pulled herself together and faced Asyut again.

“To protect me while I was sleeping, help was borrowed from the anti-saint faction people too, huh. Ghada and Milifaire too.”

“Yes.”

“I haven’t met them since I woke up. Are they no longer in the royal palace?”

“Correct, since they have already been acquitted. There is the royal palace’s surveillance, but each and every one of them are living their own lives. Once the structure of the royal palace is arranged, Ghada and others are to assume official positions in the royal palace though.”

“And Milifaire...”

“It seems she doesn’t intend to return to the royal palace ever again. However, she is not cutting relationships with that. I believe it will take time until Milifaire and I both understand each other, but I plan to persevere with that. We will have as much time as we need from here on, after all.”

“I see.”

Yuna looked up at the night sky. The navy blue of the night sky was without clouds and the flickering and blinking stars were spread out everywhere.

“I’m going to work hard from here on too.”

Yuna said that while staring at the sky. Asyut looked at the side of Yuna’s face in silence.

“During the time I spent as Celiastina, I thought I only had one year left and so I did my best, frantically and desperately. But from here on, I’m going to do my best as Yuna. —I’m going to try walking with all that I have in my own way, in a life where the end hasn’t been decided. So that if a time comes when I meet you again, Asyut, I can raise my head up high and say that.”

Before she noticed, she spun her words as if she was being hurried by something.

Aah, that was because the time of their separation was approaching. Yuna would walk from now on in a daily life without Asyut.

That was a fact that squeezed her heart horribly.

“—Yuna.”

Asyut said Yuna’s name again as if to interrupt her.

It was a very soft and warm voice.

Yuna snapped her mouth shut and turned her face to Asyut, who was sitting beside her. Their eyes met and she couldn’t move, as if his gaze was pinning her.

“Once your feelings have settled...”

Asyut slowly said his words, one by one, like he was reflecting upon them.

“—May I come for you?”

“Wha...”

Yuna looked up at Asyut beside her, eyes wide.

“You’re the only one for me. Like I thought, I can’t give you up.”

“A-Asyut?”

“I want you to be with me.”

—There was a shock like her head was struck hard.

For an instant, everything went white in front of her eyes.

She couldn’t think anything. She couldn’t understand the meaning of his words.

What did Asyut say just now?

Asyut grasped Yuna's hands tightly as she received his gaze, dumbfounded. Her fingers, which were held to the point of pain, were covered in a gradual, dull numbness.

"I will not quit being the First Holy Knight. In this royal palace, I've decided to fight that which needs to be fought and to become everyone's support... You have your own life. Perhaps I should not involve you in my intentions. But, however, I cannot do that. In the end, I cannot think of a future without you."

Asyut whispered even further to Yuna, who had forgotten even to blink.

"Please, I pray that you will nod."

She had to say something. Something... she had to say something.

Even though she knew that she couldn't move.

"I lost you once in that courtyard in the infirmary. Now that I've finally regained you, I won't lose you again."

—In that moment, in place of words, large tears dropped down.

By the time she noticed, Yuna was crying.

One drop, and then another drop. Drops of tears, which wouldn't stop, trailed down her cheeks.

No, this wasn't the place to cry.

She was always crying during the most important times like this.

"W-wait, Asyut."

"Yes."

“I’m... I’m not Celiastina anymore.”

“I know.”

“I’m just... a village girl. I don’t have anything. I can’t stand beside you.”

“I don’t need anything. As long as you are here.”

“The royal palace is definitely going to object.”

“I was able to obtain consent at the country’s assembly. —Today, at last.”

“But Celiastina’s decided to live by herself.”

“I understand that you are suffering from that. But still, I cannot give up.”

“It’s impossible. When I think about Celiastina’s feelings.”

“...I wish to hear your feelings.”

“Please, don’t say that. It’s impossible.”

“If right now is impossible then I will wait. If you— if there is even the slightest possibility you will accept me.”

Yuna shook her head single-mindedly. She couldn’t nod because this place wasn’t the place she should stay. Just because Celiastina had left the place she belonged in until now didn’t mean she could settle in. She hadn’t spent all her time until now with that intention.

“Asyut, you’re going to meet a lot of people in the future. So—”

“You must know, don’t you. That no matter the people I encounter, you’re the only one for me.”

Stop. Don’t create a reason for me to stand beside you like that.

Various thoughts ran through her head and her mind was a complete mess.

But even amongst that— whether she wanted to or not, there was a part of her that

was drawn by Asyut's words.

She wanted to nod. She wanted to accept Asyut's proposal.

(I just want to stay beside Asyut.)

Her feelings were just that.

But she couldn't nod. Because that would be a betrayal. —Ah, but to who?

"Do you remember my words? That everything about me started when I met you."

Yuna nodded with a face messy with tears.

"I remember. But."

"After you disappeared, like I thought, my world was returned to pitch darkness. I don't want to return to that dark world anymore."

Asyut's voice resounded with a terrible sincerity.

"That's why I want you by my side."

—This moment right now, where she was by his side like this, she knew it was a tremendous miracle.

Miracles didn't last forever. They brought about a momentary light, a fleeting thing that would disappear soon. That was precisely why they were so precious and beloved.

Yes, she should know that but...

If she encountered a miracle that she couldn't lose no matter what...

If she found a miracle that she absolutely couldn't give up on...

(What should I do?)

Yuna asked her own heart.

(Is it alright for me to take that hand? But.)

"You do not have to say anything right now. Only, please tell me your feelings. Celiastina's circumstances, both of our positions, none of that matters. Just your personal feelings. —Yuna."

Asyut called her name once more.

Yuna grabbed back Asyut's hands.

She—.

Chapter Fifteen

“Mm, when they’re lined up like this they look wonderful!”

“Truly. The smell of herbs is somewhat soothing, isn’t it.”

In a corner of the infirmary in the royal palace, Mislee and Nasha clapped their hands happily.

Before their eyes was a fine, newly built medicine shelf. The shelf, which was at the height of the waist of a lady, was crowded with various small and large bottles that were lined up. Inside those bottles were many different kinds of medicinal herbs. There were various uses such as ones to be brewed or grounded and then coated on.

“Until now, we could only deal with small external injuries in this infirmary, but with this the kinds of patients we accept will also increase.”

Mislee placed both hands on her waist and gave a satisfied sigh.

“This place won’t be called a place for soldiers to slack off anymore.”

“Of course. This place is better than the main infirmary too!”

“Ahaha, it’s not like we’re competing with them though. But I really am happy. Thank you very much— Yuna.”

Mislee turned to look back at Yuna, who was cleaning up her compound station at a table a little ways away.

Yuna raised her head and returned a wide smile.

“No, I’m the one who’s grateful. I’m sorry I can only puff out my chest for knowledge on medicinal herbs though.”

“What are you talking about. I’m really happy just to work together with a cute, young lady such as yourself.”

“Y-you’re exaggerating. Even if you sweet talk me, you won’t get anything out of it.”

Yuna hurriedly lowered her face and stacked her mixing instruments with awkward motions. Nasha watched as Yuna carried those over to the washing area.

“—But it still feels strange for some reason. Three years have passed since then and now we’re able to spend our days together like this again with Yuna in the infirmary.”

“I don’t find it all that strange, because I knew we would surely see her again.”

Mislee said that in a leisurely tone. Beside her, Nasha hurriedly waved both hands.

“Of course, I believed that too!... Well, it’d be a lie to say I didn’t feel any worry though.”

“That’s true. During the three years without Yuna you weren’t lively at all, were you, Nasha. Even when I encouraged you, saying Asyut would soon go to pick up Yuna personally, it was as if there was no effect. When I saw you walking alone in the corridors, I thought there was a ghost roaming around.”

“M-Mislee!”

Yuna had also heard about how Nasha’s depression at the time couldn’t just be called a funny story. Nevertheless, to be able to respond to that right now with mutual smiles showed how this warmth was certainly in their hands. She was sure she would never let it go again.

“Yuna, I’ll help wash the dishes too.”

“Thank you.”

The two stood beside each other at the washing area. Somehow, it became silent and they listened to the sound of water while moving their hands.

“...But I’m really glad that you came back, Yuna.”

Nasha murmured that in halting words. Even now it seemed she wasn’t accustomed to calling Yuna’s name, but though she called it out awkwardly it was lovable. Yuna turned her face to Nasha beside her.

“I’m saying this only because it’s now, but although Mislee laughed about asking Lord

Asyut to comfort me, that wouldn't have been of help at all! Because he didn't tell us your situation in any detail, Yuna. I know it was really hard to deal with various problems and because I couldn't do anything there was no helping the matter though."

"Is that how it was."

"Yes, that's right! I seriously did think many times about clinging to Lord Asyut's legs and crying out that I wouldn't let go until he told me what was going on though."

"I wonder what kind of reaction Asyut would have had if you really did that."

"I should have tried it, huh."

Nasha snickered; she had also grown strong to talk like that about Asyut. Yuna had heard that Nasha was officially serving as Asyut's maid, but with this they were probably getting along well together.

"Ah, I just remembered, Yuna!"

Mislee's voice leapt to them from outside the washing area.

"May I ask you to run an errand to Ser Siegcrest? I don't mind if you finish up for today like that."

"To Sieg?"

When Yuna returned to where Mislee was while wiping her hands, she found Mislee diligently transferring the salve Yuna had just made several days ago into small jars.

"Yes. It seems that the salves the training grounds keep on reserve for emergency treatment of wounds is about to run out. Apparently, they normally order from the main clinic but this time they want to use your salve, Yuna, since you made some."

"Is that so."

That was gratifying to hear but also a heavy responsibility. —Although, because she was employed as a personal herbalist of the royal palace, opportunities like this would surely increase steadily in the future.

"It would be best that people like Ser Aeneas don't personally hurt themselves because

they wish to use your handmade salve though, Yuna.”

“There’s no way they would do that, jeez!”

Mislee handed the basket with jars over to Yuna while giggling in amusement.

“Have a good day and I look forward to working with you tomorrow again.”

“Yuna, thank you for your work today. See you tomorrow.”

“...Okay, I’m going.”

Even though she showed a sulking face, in the end Yuna nodded shyly.

It had been a very long time since she showed her face at the training grounds of the Order of Holy Knights.

She recalled the time she had been forcibly brought by Siegcrest before. She was put on his shoulder like some sort of object— it was an extremely embarrassing experience, even remembering it now.

Fortunately, this time she wasn’t in the spotlight and she was able to arrive at the training grounds very calmly; although, in a sense, a simple girl who could be found anywhere standing in front of the training grounds of the country’s greatest starring Order of Knights might stand out.

She popped her face in from the entrance to peek around.

It looked like training had just ended and each person seemed to be having friendly conversations as they pleased or were maintaining their weapons. Yuna looked for the person she came for even while having strange looks sent to her by the knights who were leaving the training grounds.

(Ah, Aeneas and Neisan spotted.)

On the far left side of the training grounds, Neisan was sitting on the step of a wall and Aeneas was talking about something to him. For squires like them to be here meant they might have been doing a large joint exercise.

(But it's hard to call out to them...)

If it was only those two in this place then she wouldn't hesitate to call out.

But when she was wondering what to do and staring at the side of their faces, Neisan was the one who noticed her gaze and turned to her. As usual, he was a person who erased his own presence cleanly but was sensitive to the presence of others. Neisan said something to Aeneas and Aeneas whipped around to Yuna's direction.

When she gave a shy nod, Aeneas returned a nod in the same way. And then he came to the entrance immediately like that. Neisan didn't seem to intend to move from his spot and drank his water alone.

"Yuna, is something the matter? For you to be at such a dirty place."

"Erm, I'm on a bit of an errand."

"Errand?"

"Yep. I have something to hand to Sieg."

The knights passing by looked at their interaction with teasing eyes.

"Aeneas, a delivery for you? How nice."

"His popularity is booming as ever, that Aeneas."

"It's not like that!"

Yuna gave a wry smile at Aeneas' panicked state. Because there was no one among them who knew that this girl right here had been a temporary Celiastina, the current Yuna must have appeared in their eyes as a servant who was carrying a present for a knight she admired at present.

"I apologize, Yuna."

"No, I'm the one who should apologize. I feel like I'm interrupting somewhat, sorry."

"Ah, no, not at all."

When they both said words of apology to each other, a particularly loud voice broke in between both of them.

“What, isn’t it Yuna there! What’s up?”

Siegcrest appeared from the back of the training grounds. His impression of being a loud lion was as usual as he raised a muscular right arm and waved a hand in their direction.

He was the only one from an early stage – no, perhaps the instant he knew her name – who seemed to have no resistance to calling Yuna by that name. Strangely enough, even Yuna herself was like that, but there was no sense of discomfort at all when she was called Yuna by him. Even though she still felt a ticklish sensation when those she knew in the royal palace called her Yuna, it was different only for Siegcrest.

“This is the salve you asked for. I hope it works properly though.”

“Ooh, so this is that stuff! I’ve heard rumors that there’s no mistake with your mixing skills.”

“No way, I still have a lot to learn. But if there’s something I’m able to prepare then please let me know at any time.”

“Yeah, thanks. We use this salve the most, so for a while we might just be asking for these all the time. But, well, I’ll watch out so that Aeneas doesn’t hurt himself on purpose to hog the salve.”

“Vice-captain! I wouldn’t do such a thing!”

Siegcrest flapped his hand in response to Aeneas who protested with a red face. Yuna secretly smiled, feeling like she had experienced a similar exchange just earlier ago.

“So, are you going back to the infirmary after this, Yuna?”

“Oh, no. I was told that it was okay to finish up for today.”

“I see. Then, do you wanna go out to town and get dinner with everyone? There’s lots of things I want to ask, like how things have been going with Asyut lately.”

“T-that’s a little... There’s nothing to talk about.”

“No, no, that can’t be true. I heard there was a huge mound of problems.”

Siegcrest didn’t seem the type to have an interest in people’s gossip, but when it was related to Yuna and Asyut he wanted to know all the details and it was troubling.

“I’m sorry, but we’ll have to do that next time... Erm, I was thinking about going to Linus after this.”

“Oh what. Getting ready for marriage?”

“T-that’s not it at all! There’s just simply too much I don’t know, so he’s been teaching me a lot.”

For several hours after the day’s work, she studied under Linus on days his schedule was open.

As the saint’s guardian he also ended up undertaking being the guardian of the “miracle girl” born by the saint. She learned from him the knowledge necessary to live as a member of the royal palace in the future, such as reading difficult literature and the history of the country.

It was Yuna who declined firmly in the beginning, feeling apologetic for how busy he was, but she was told by Linus that he didn’t mind at all if he was able to neglect bothersome work with her. Although it wasn’t like she accepted those words without question, she accepted his kindness gratefully and from time to time she was the one who carried herself to his office.

“Well, if that’s the case then go and work hard. For me though, I think it’s enough for you to be next to Asyut even without any knowledge, Yuna.”

“I-I’m going now!”

This topic was embarrassing and made her squirm, unable to stand being there. Yuna turned on her heel hurriedly and, slipping into the knights who were on their way home, she left that spot as if she were running away.

Passing through the corridors in a run, she headed to the area where there were offices of high-ranking aristocrats.

Once she came this far, the number of people in the corridors was quite small. The people coming and going in this area already knew about Yuna's existence, and so she was not given strange looks whenever she was occasionally in the royal palace. Yuna heaved a relieved sigh and finally slowed her walking speed a little.

"Excuse me."

Along with a light knock she opened the door to Linus' office. Because it wasn't locked, it seemed like he was present in the room.

"It's Yuna. I'm coming in."

"Please, enter."

Linus, who welcomed Yuna while facing his office desk, seemed to notice the basket held in Yuna's hand immediately with sharp eyes.

"Oh my, could it be that you brought a gift for me for working so hard?"

"Ah, sorry, this is empty."

It was the basket which had contained salve jars until recently. When she turned the basket over with a look of innocence, Linus shrugged his shoulders with a disappointed look.

"Good grief, you're teasing me."

"Next time I'll bake bread and bring it with me then. I'm pretty good at cooking."

"I'll look forward to that. —Well, would you like a seat?"

Yuna sat down on the sofa, as offered.

"I didn't intend to stop by today, so I came empty-handed. Because something unexpected happened, I ended up appearing here suddenly."

"Something unexpected?"

"M-Mm."

It was hard to say she was embarrassed being teased by Siegcrest and escaped to here. Linus didn't pursue that topic any further when she prevaricated her words.

"Well, it is also good to relax from time to time, since when you're left alone you keep at something for too long."

"I don't do that."

Linus leaned back heavily on the chair's backrest and clasped both hands, which were on the armrests, in front of his stomach.

"It's almost a month since you came to the royal palace. It's been quick, hasn't it."

"...Mhm."

"Have you already grown completely accustomed to living in the royal palace as Yuna?"

"Yes, that's right. Thanks to you."

Yuna nodded with an ambivalent smile. Certainly, she was used to living here but not to the point of being completely accustomed. In the end, it was quite different from the way it was before. Even if she had knowledge about the royal palace, if she was living here in a different position then she would run into various walls.

Furthermore, three years had brought more significant changes to this royal palace than she thought.

—No, it wasn't simply because time passed, but because a change was clearly brought by those carrying a strong will to try and change things.

First, everyone's eyes towards Saint Celiastina, who even now did not leave the tower, changed.

During the time Yuna was substituting as her, the people to the very end did not have that much unpleasant thoughts about Celiastina; however, a fundamental part changed.

Celiastina's true ability became known to those in the royal palace.

Until then, her her ability was said to "unknown" publicly, but underneath it was a

situation where many horrible assumptions flew around. However, on and after it was made public that her power was said to amplify the life force of those she connected with, the gazes of the people in the royal palace towards her became warm, mixed with respect.

It also became well known to a part of the royal palace that Yuna herself had also touched the grace of Celiastina's power. On rare occasions, she was also treated as the "miracle girl" and she had a small portion of prestige as Yuna. However, perhaps owing to that, she was accepted without dissent to work at the royal palace.

But, of course, it was not like everything was accepted smoothly.

Saint Celiastina dissolved her engagement with the First Holy Knight and was to spend the rest of her life in the tower as the bride of God—.

In regard to that announcement, not only the royal palace but also the whole country descended into a great chaos. And then, still lingering in that shock, a great majority of the citizens who knew nothing about the circumstances did not believe that fact.

"Hey, Linus, how has Celiastina been lately? You've met her during this time, right?"

"Yes, that girl is doing fine."

Hearing those words, Yuna was relieved.

"Please be at ease, because I will properly watch over Celia."

"...Mm."

When Linus saw Yuna nod, he suddenly stood up. He glanced at the window behind her and made a surprised, oh my, noise.

"That person is alone there again."

"That person?"

Drawn by Linus' exasperated voice, Yuna also walked over to the side of the window. The first thing that jumped into her eyes when she looked outside the window was the red of the sinking, evening sun. And then on the narrow trail from the far left of the window— there stood a small human figure.

“That’s...”

From here the size of that figure was only as large as a single petal of an asiatic jasmine.

“There is only person who saunters about in that place without bringing along attendants.”

“The... king?”

Yuna and Linus exchanged looks.

“That’s right.”

“—I’m going to go there!”

“Alright, alright, take care.”

Yuna left Linus’ office in a great rush. As she ran through the corridors she realized she forgot the empty basket in the room, but decided not to care.

When she exited the building, the sun was about to set at last.

Yuna took in a deep breath and filled her chest with the clear air that was slightly damp.

It seemed like it had rained. The dew reflected the red light and everything glittered like it was magical.

The king just so happened to be walking back to here on a single trail. Yuna stood still in that spot and waited as his figure gradually approached. He seemed to have noticed Yuna after a while, but he was not particularly surprised and accepted her presence with a wide smile.

“Hello, what a beautiful sunset, is it not?”

Yuna, who came back to herself at those words, nodded repeatedly.

“Against my better judgment, I slipped out of work and came for a stroll. My retainers

will get angry at me again, hm.”

“...Rono.”

Yuna unconsciously called out to him like that. When he was called, he tilted his head slightly with a calm expression still.

He stood at the top of this country— as the king. However, it was only when they faced each other alone together like this that she was able to speak to him as the strange, old man, Rono. A person she could express her ideas to as she pleased, leaving out all the difficult things such as politics, authority, and other things.

Even so, it was the first time the two were meeting alone after she came into the royal palace as Yuna.

“I’m glad I’m able to meet you again like this, Rono.”

“Oh my, oh my, I am also very glad. It is quite moving to be able to see you here, even now.”

Why was it that her chest felt stuffy?

She knew he had various faces. Even his merciless side as the king was thrust before Yuna’s eyes countless of times up to now. But still, in the end, Rono was Rono. She thought his smile was warm.

“How is life in the royal palace?”

“Yes, I seem to be managing somehow.”

“That is good to hear. It was worth the effort Asyut put in as well, hm. In just three years, this royal palace has changed quite a lot. The engagement between you and Asyut is also starting to be accepted.”

“That’s also because of your support, Rono.”

“Oh, no no. I simply acted with my own thoughts.”

Lowering his eyes, he showed a troubled smile.

“Yuna.”

“...Yes?”

“Truly, many things have happened, haven’t they.”

“Yes.”

“I’ve hurt you many times.”

“.....”

“Down the road, I may choose a future as the king that will hurt you.”

“.....”

“Nevertheless, I am glad that I can relax and view the sunset with you like this right now.”

“Me too.”

Yuna raised her head and stared intently at the sun which was sinking beyond the horizon’s trees.

“I’m grateful from the bottom of my heart for the push you gave on a lot of things, Rono. I haven’t been hurt by you because everything I did was what I wanted to do.”

When she said this with a laugh, Rono blinked his eyes many times.

“Hahaa. Now that you mention it, that was the case. Mm, certainly.”

Yuna smiled wryly.

“It’s the same about Asyut too... Rono, is it really okay? I’ve run after that person up to here. And I wish to stay beside him forever after too.”

She couldn’t look away from the sunset. She couldn’t look at Rono’s face.

“Of course.”

His words soaked slowly into her heart.

“Of course you can. Please remain by his side.”

Those were words she wanted more than anything else. That was what she thought from the bottom of her heart. She couldn't see the future she was walking to yet, but right now in this instant she wanted those words.

“—Thank you, Rono.”

Yuna bit her lip hard; she could tell that beside her Rono had smiled suddenly.

“Did you know? That Asyut, in these three years he's been apart from you, has stood alone in that flower garden over there at sunset every day.”

“Asyut has?”

Why alone— standing in the flower garden?

In that instant, Yuna immediately found the answer within herself due to a small light which just so happened to pass beside them.

“Oh my, a torch bug.”

(—Aah.)

Yuna took a single step, as if she were invited by that light.

“Rono, I'm going to the flower gardens for a moment.”

“Of course. —Go on.”

Rustling, rustling.

Yuna's footprints were engraved with every step she took on the damp ground. Yuna loved the sound of the dirt getting pressed like this. That was why she especially loved the period of time after the rain.

She walked on the small path, where there was no one, together with whimsical footsteps.

And then, as if to get ahead of Yuna, another small light floated past her.

After that was another. Following that, two more. Little by little, a fleeting light began to emerge in her surroundings.

Yuna took another single step, as if she were invited by that light.

Her face spontaneously broke into a grin.

The setting sun had completely nestled close to the horizon.

Yuna's vision, which began to be covered in darkness, was illuminated by the light of the torch bugs that began to increase rapidly in number. The vegetation that was overgrown alongside the path suddenly cut off— in exchange, a flower garden that stretched to the horizon spread out.

Yuna was walking in the middle of lights now.

There was already a countless number of torch bugs dancing in the air.

Even the stars of the night sky, as if ashamed at themselves, twinkled quietly in the far distance.

Every time the wind blew, the faint lights swayed. The flowers, which wore the lights as if they were substitutes for petals, continued everywhere— it was just like a sea of lights.

(Honestly, a lot of things happened.)

(There were many times I thought I couldn't go on anymore too.)

(But I can be glad from the bottom of my heart that I walked to this point.)

From here on, she was sure she wouldn't stop walking. She could walk to anywhere.

Because the world was filled with this much light.

How beautiful it was. Why was it so wonderful?

There was no way she could stop and stand still.

If, no matter how painful and hard the journey was, once it was overcome, this kind of scenery was spread out.

Behind Yuna, who stood there absentmindedly, a pair of even footsteps approached.

Yuna did nothing but stare ahead, not turning around.

Eventually, the footsteps stopped right beside Yuna.

"It's beautiful, isn't it."

Asyut, who was next to her, murmured that in a calm voice.

"Yes, very."

Yuna also answered with few words.

Because this moment was filled enough, to the point where words weren't needed.

"I've been waiting all this time."

“Mm.”

“To spend this time with you like this.”

“Mm.”

Yuna bit her lip and nodded.

These three years seemed to be short, yet felt so long.

She still did not believe that she was enough to stand equal next to Asyut like this.

However, gradually, little by little with time, she wanted to become someone who could get close next to him.

Wherever you are, I will always come for you.

The words of Asyut in the past came to her mind.

Exactly like those words, he chased after Yuna countless of times.

Even when hatred covered his body. Even when Yuna tried to leave.

And now, even at this very moment.

“Finally, I was able to fulfill our promise.”

“—Yes.”

The promise which she thought would surely never be fulfilled.

But now he was next to her.

(Hey, Asyut.)

No matter how many times I say thank you it wouldn't be enough.

No matter how many times I say I'm happy it wouldn't be enough.

That's why I'm not going to say those.

But I want to say just this.

“—Let's always come and see this sight, in the future too, Asyut.”

Afterword

Okay, now we've really reached the end of this long 2 year project. Thank you to everyone who supported this series or dropped by to read it. I'm going to take a long break after this and maybe play some otome games LOL but honestly this is still one of my favorite books and I'm glad I got to share it with everyone. Once again, please consider supporting the artist if you enjoyed this book and I only shared about 1/4 of the illustrations in total so!!

At any rate, please enjoy the author's comments down below.

Here we go!

Thank you very much for accompanying me to the final volume of "The Light Beyond the Road's End".

It's been a very long time since the publication of the third volume and to those who picked up this work, despite that, I truly cannot raise my head.

First, please let me give my feelings of gratitude.

Once again, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

This work, as you know, was originally a web novel which was made into a book.

Naturally, because it is a commercial work, if it does not sell then it won't be continued and so, to start with, the first volume was released. At the time, I remember just praying that I could deliver the final volume in the form of a book to everyone.

After that, it was due to everyone's support that the next volume was decided on but, being a coward, I had negative thoughts on how the series might be discontinued by the next volume and so I should compact everything so that it fits in that one volume (lol).

However, my editor, Mr. Y, pushed me strongly to go together until the fourth volume and, instead, I ended up writing beyond the story that was imagined at the beginning.

And that is this final volume.

This work is a story where Yuna confronts many things, works hard, and matures. And so I thought I'd be able to bring the story to a conclusion by the third volume. Actually, the web novel (although the contents differ in various ways) reaches the ending in the third volume of the book version.

When I thought about what to write in the brand new fourth volume, I thought about how I wanted to give shape to Asyut, who has been facing Yuna all this time, and what he feels, what he thinks, and what actions he would take. I wanted not just Yuna to do her best but for Asyut to also do his best.

As a result, I think Asyut has worked very hard. I also don't have regrets any longer after this. Besides, right now I strongly feel that coming this far is "The Light Beyond the Road's End" that I really wanted to write.

However, even though I say that, in the end I've been constantly anxious about all the time it's taken until the publication of the final volume. I also became timid, thinking that all the readers would have already forgotten this work.

However, until this day where I am writing the afterword, I was greatly encouraged by the continuous messages and impressions I received from everyone towards this work. Even when the publication of the final volume was announced, I received many thankful and celebratory words.

I am worried whether or not this final volume will meet the expectations of everyone who has said "I've been waiting", but I think I am satisfied in my own way with this one volume I've completed with my utmost effort.

Lastly.

Thank you to Ms. Shirosaki Saya, who was in charge of the final volume's illustration.

Thank you so much for cheerfully accepting the sudden appointment and outrageous request for the final volume only. The moment I saw the lovely front cover where Asyut and Yuna were facing each other, holding hands, I felt like that one picture summarized this entire story and was very moved. Yuna, who appeared as an illustration for the first time in this volume, was exactly as I imagined and I was really surprised and delighted again.

Unfortunately, Mr. Kishida Mel was not available this time but thank you very much for everything up to now. In the end, I believe that it was because these characters were designed by Mr. Kishida that this work exists like this.

Also, to my editor Mr. Y, thank you so much for accompanying me from the first volume to the final volume. Of course, not only did you work very hard to publish the final volume, but you also dug into the character's emotions and actions together with me, were involved with the revisions, and corrected my strange Japanese accurately. I can't thank you enough. I'm glad I followed Mr. Y!

Also, I'm grateful to East Press who gave me the go-ahead for the publication of this work. Thank you so much for your continued publication over the past several years and it was an honor. What a generous company.

Even while saying lastly it ended up being long.

I apologize sincerely for how it became another formal afterword. I tried reading the past afterwords, but I felt like that excitement is grueling on me... (lol) and I realized there too that it's really been a long time since then.

Well then, once again, I am so grateful to everyone who was involved in this work.

It would be an honor if I could see everyone again somewhere.

Thank you very much.

2015 October.

Character Page



シェリアスティーナ

聖女。
冷血な聖女として恐れられ
ていたが……。

アシュート

第一神聖騎士で、
シェリアスティーナの婚約者。
ユナの存在を知り、
彼女を救おうとするが……。

ユナ

馬車に轢かれた町娘。
約束のときがきて、
シェリアスティーナの身体から
去ったが……。

登場人物紹介

Celiastina [シェリアスティーナ]

The saint. She was feared as a cold-blooded saint, however...

Asyut [アシュート]

The First Holy Knight, who is the fiancé of Saint Celiastina. Knowing about Yuna's existence, he tries to save her, but...

Yuna [ユーナ]

A village girl who was struck by a carriage. The promised time came and she left Celiastina's body, but...



ロノ

国王。
一見優しそうだが
食えない人物。

イーニース

シェリアステーナの護衛。

ライナス

宰相補佐。前聖女の息子。

ヨデル

神官。
しばらく旅に出ていた。

ジークレスト

アシュートの友人で、
神聖騎士団副長。

Rono [ロノ]

The king. At first glance he looks kind, but he is a cunning person.

Linus [ライナス]

An aide to the prime minister. Son of the previous saint.

Aeneas [イーニース]

Celiastina's bodyguard.

Yodel [ヨデル]

A priest. She had left on a journey for a while.

Siegcrest [ジークレスト]

A friend of Asyut and the Vice-captain of the Order of Holy Knights.



PDF by: traitorA#ZEN